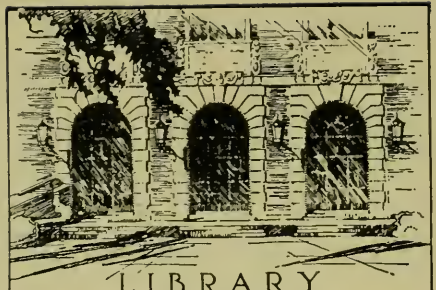
A Mine of Wealth

Esmè Stuart



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A MINE OF WEALTH.

VOL III.

A MINE OF WEALTH

BY

ESMÉ STUART

AUTHOR OF

'MARRIED TO ORDER,' 'A WOMAN OF FORTY,'
'KESTELL OF GREYSTONE,' ETC.

'How the world is made for each of us!
How all we perceive and know in it
Tends to some moment's product thus,
When a soul declares itself—to wit,
By its fruit, the thing it does!'

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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A MINE OF WEALTH.

CHAPTER I.

A CHANCE MEETING.

Much to the surprise of the housekeeper, Clara announced to her that they were all going to the English lakes, and that the furniture must return to its life under chintz covers. It was decided to engage rooms at the Patterdale Hotel, where comfort combined with moderate luxury made the days pass quickly.

'Oh, Percival, you did good; I believe

it is all your doing that we are going away from that horrid woman. I do congratulate you. I believe that at the bottom of his heart papa is glad to get away.'

This was Clara's exclamation to her brother, who was the very reverse of cheerful.

'You forget the costs on my side! But it is only for a time. When father has forgotten Mrs. Beddoes then——'

'What did he say to you? Papa only asked me if the lakes would suit me: I would have said that Pekin was pleasant had he suggested it, so as to help you to get him away from here.'

'Thank you, but—does it seem to you, Clara, that he has given in rather too easily?'

'Oh, no; of course at first he was bound to be cross about it, but he can't really be

in earnest about marrying again! How can he want to turn me out and to make you miserable?'

'Anyhow, we are going away, and I don't much care what happens to me as long as I can keep my promise. It weighs on me dreadfully that I was the unconscious instrument of bringing them together. If one could have guessed!'

'Unconscious—that is just it. What is the use of blaming fate?'

'I told Sara not to write. I know that she will trust me; but all the same, what will she think of me?'

'Poor Percy! When she is of age everything will come right, and you will forget all this time.'

'Forget! never! It means pain to her, and she is the sweetest and most unselfish woman on earth.'

'Then she is very unlike her mother! But I don't see why she should not write to you.'

'Because, Clara, I must not let Mrs. Beddoes have a cause of complaint against me. She forbade any correspondence. Oh, if I could but go and comfort Sara! If only you knew her, you would understand how hateful I must appear to her.'

'That horrid Mrs. Beddoes took care that I should never cast eyes upon her! Honestly, Percival, we nearly had her for a step-mother as well as your mother-in-law. Now I mean to make papa enjoy his life with us so much that he will forget her, and not dream of marrying again.'

By the time the Osbornes reached Patterdale, they were all in better spirits.

Lord Stretton, indeed, was especially cheerful. He seemed to have forgotten the quarrel with his son, and was as eager as a boy over the formation of various plans for the enjoyment of the whole party. They found some acquaintances in the hotel, and the September weather was, this year, especially favourable to excursions.

Percival seemed the only one who was not happy. Many a time as they steamed down the lake, or else hired donkeys to help the ladies up to the brow of the 'mighty Helvellyn,' Percival would be silent; he was saying to himself, 'What is Sara doing, and of what is she thinking now?' But he would not, he dared not, break the silence; for both their sakes he would not do it.

Meanwhile, he watched his father close-

ly. Percival at last concluded that Clara was right, and that his remonstrance had made the necessary impression. Most likely he had realized that he could not marry again and also keep his children with him; for Percival knew that his father was tenderly attached to him, and that Clara, freed from her mother's influence, was much improved in her manner towards him. For all these reasons, life at Patterdale flowed on smoothly. The old feeling of close affection between father and son returned. They walked and went out fishing on the lake, they looked over plans for new cottages; in fact, Percival, hoping that the passing fancy was disappearing before the dictates of common-sense, tried to bear cheerfully the silence he had imposed between himself and Sara. Nevertheless, when he did think about the future, and that was continually, he could

not help feeling sad. He did not doubt either himself or Sara. Many true lovers had waited before now; in that there was but little hardship, but even when Sara came of age, how much further would he be towards the realization of his own hopes? At times he felt inclined to let everything take its chance. Why should not his father marry Mrs. Beddoes, if he insisted upon it, and then he and Clara would seek for another home, because instinctively Percival felt that Sara's mother would brook no rival. But then, what about his promise? How should he reconcile his conscience with this course of action? No, as long as possible he must keep that woman away!

One day when his father joined an acquaintance on the lake, and Clara refused to walk out on account of the showers, Percival started off alone up the path lead-

ing to Helvellyn. He knew that if the clouds cleared away he should get a glorious view. He loved solitude, for it seemed to bring him nearer to Sara; but to-day his mind was full of sadness as he thought of his useless life and of his Oxford friends, many of them already on the way to making a name, or beginning to carve a fortune for themselves, whilst he was chained to idleness and to a hateful promise. What was Sara thinking of him—she who had noble ideas of usefulness? How long should he be able to bear this bondage?

Thus thinking, he walked further up the lane. He skirted a wood, and then continued the path leading upwards, and always upwards. Every now and then he turned round to watch the mountains rising higher and higher on the opposite side of the valley. The clouds

brooding over the range of the High Street were occasionally rent asunder by an upper current of air unfelt below. Then he turned away and proceeded upon his road. After a time he reached a gap in a wall, and from thence he could see the clear tarn lying silent and dark at the foot of the last steep spur of the kingly mountain. He selected the left side, climbing at once upon the striding edge. He was a good climber, and this path offered only a pleasant difficulty; but, as he still ascended, he heard distant thunder rolling towards him. The weird stillness oppressed him. A solitary bird flew swiftly past him, and the thunder-cloud approached with giant strides. In a few minutes more he was in the midst of the storm. The thunder seemed to be exactly above his head, and the lightning was flashed forth as it were against a black curtain let down from

heaven. Then a sudden gust of wind rent the cloud, and, shrieking, hurled itself against the spur of the giant mountain. For a few moments Percival clung to a great boulder, for he was on the narrowest part of the edge. He looked down into the depth below, and thought how soon a man might here meet with death. A slip, a strong blast, and the curtain that had so long hidden the mystery of the future would be revealed to him.

Suddenly the sound ceased, the storm rolled away towards other heights, and the lightning, like the fiery forked tongues of huge serpents, was withdrawn from view. When Percival stepped upon the bare table-land which formed the summit of the mountain, there was a great calm around him.

At this moment he found himself confronting a face which he knew. At first he

could not recall to whom it belonged, then suddenly he knew that he was in the presence of Sara's uncle.

'Mr. Gwillian,' he said, holding out his hand.

Mr. Gwillian drew back a little, and did not take the proffered hand, though he raised his hat. He had never done more than this in any of their former meetings, and Percival recollected that most likely he knew nothing of him in connection with Sara. The young man felt reckless. He must speak to him, he must hear more of her, and he at once broke the ice. He had, besides, another and almost a stronger motive for speaking to Mr. Gwillian. To look at his face was to be certain of his integrity.

'It is strange we should meet here,' said Percival, 'and stranger still that you are the one person I should have

wished to meet had a choice been given to me.'

Mr. Gwillian was completely taken by surprise, but his manner was not softened by Percival's friendliness.

'The storm has been short if sharp, still it may return, and I fear that I must not linger,' he said, stiffly.

'Are you staying at Patterdale, if so, may I walk home with you?'

It is by no means easy to get rid of a young man who intends not to be shaken off.

'Yes, we have taken a house at the entrance of the village, but I daresay you will get over the ground more quickly than I do.'

'I can accommodate myself to any pace. Forgive me for being so importunate, but let me make a confession at once. I—I am engaged to your niece, Miss Sara

Beddoes;' and Percival smiled in the fulness of his joy.

Mr. Gwillian turned towards him, and was for a moment silent from astonishment. Then he said,

'You, you are engaged to Sara! And since when?' His face looked stern.

'Perhaps I used the word engaged unadvisedly. Mrs. Beddoes will not hear of an engagement; in fact, she allows no communication between us. You see why your presence has filled me with joy.'

'Sara's mother forbids it! I am glad—very glad of it, Mr. Osborne.'

'What! are you also going against us?' Percival's joy was short-lived.

'It is strange—very strange.'

He walked away a few steps, and then returned to him. Perhaps something in Percival's face struck him. It was so open and so manly.

'Are you in earnest about—about Sara?'

'Certainly. I shall marry her or—no one else.'

'And you say that her mother will not give her consent?'

'She refuses utterly to have anything to say to me.'

Mr. Gwillian was silent a moment, then he said,

'I am going home by the mines; will you accompany me?'

Percival did not hesitate. He wanted to consult Sara's uncle.

'I have but one piece of advice to give you, Mr. Osborne. If Mrs. Beddoes refuses her consent, then do not imagine that you will thwart her. You will never marry Sara. Her mother has an iron will, she is immovable.'

'But this is a case in which Mrs. Bed-

does's consent cannot always be withheld. Sara will be of age in a short time.'

'I have never known my sister alter her determination—never, and—and——'

There was a pause. They were both silent, each plunged in their own thoughts; then Percival again broke the silence.

'Of course I know that Miss Beddoes will be rich when she comes of age. I do not know what her fortune will be, neither do I care. Had she possessed nothing, my feelings would have been the same. I suppose Mrs. Beddoes thinks that——'

'You are your father's son, Mr. Osborne. She will never forgive him.'

'Tell me. That is the question I wished to ask, but dared not.'

'When she was quite young they met, and—he was as you are, sure that he could not live without her, but he married

another, and my sister, in pique, also married another. She imagines you would treat Sara—but, no—this has nothing to do with me, I can only repeat what I have said, if Sara's mother has said no, you will never marry her daughter.'

'Then I shall marry her without her mother's consent.'

Mr. Gwillian looked up at the young man.

'I believe that you are in earnest. I can only repeat, if Mrs. Beddoes has said *no*, your *yes* will be of no avail.'

Percival could not speak of that other thing so important to him, and apparently Mr. Gwillian knew nothing about it.

'You magnify a woman's power,' he said, smiling. 'I have promised to have no communication with Sara till she is of age, then nothing shall prevent me——'

'Mrs. Beddoes will.'

'She is your sister.'

'Yes, that is why I am certain. I am very fond of Sara, and therefore I prefer saying nothing more; she must live with her mother till——'

'Till she is of age?'

'Till her mother chooses to let her go.'

'Why should she wish to spoil her happiness?'

Mr. Gwillian waved his hand.

'Because her own is of more importance.'

Percival laughed.

'But our happiness is also of the greatest importance to us, and I fear we shall not be less anxious to secure it.'

'You would not secure it at any cost.'

'Still there are a few facts which even Mrs. Beddoes cannot alter.'

'Don't trust them.' Then, pointing

out a short cut, Mr. Gwillian added, 'I have said enough, more than enough to warn you. Don't recur to the subject. Poor Sara! Whatever you do, Mr. Osborne, do not add to her troubles.'

'May I come and see you? Anyone who loves Sara——'

'Come if you will, but come alone.'

Percival understood the hint, and, indeed he had no wish to share the knowledge of Mr. Gwillian's presence with his father, or even with Clara.

'I will. And, when Sara comes of age, you will help us?'

Mr. Gwillian shook his head.

'I shall be powerless; but, if you want my advice, when she comes of age go and take her away from her mother—if you can.'

CHAPTER II.

HERRINGHAM.

When Sara came to her senses, she could not at first recollect where she was or what had happened to her. Gradually, however, her reasoning powers returned, and she slowly got up and sat in the arm-chair. She felt years older, almost as if she were another Sara—some one utterly different from the Sara who, but a short time ago, had been so joyous and so free from care. Some evil influence was working against her, but it was not an influence which she could understand or appreciate.

She seemed to be surrounded with darkness, and to be left alone and to have no one to show her which way to go.

She saw Percival's letter on the floor, and she stooped down to pick it up. She was not angry with him; she trusted him. She knew that it must be something very powerful which had influenced him to write that letter to her, but what was that something? Her heart felt sick with undefined fear. Life seemed to her a place where enemies might lurk in unseen corners ready to harm peaceful travellers, and she, who had before been endowed with good health and spirits, felt suddenly afraid—afraid of what? She could not answer this question; she only knew that, when she crept downstairs, she was another Sara from the Sara who had walked with Percival among the hills. Her face was pale, and her limbs shook, but instinctively she

resolved to say nothing to her mother. Her mother did not appreciate Percival, she sided with his father, and indeed she had enthralling affairs of her own to attend to. The effort Sara made to appear as if nothing had happened was tremendous; she did not even know if she succeeded in appearing as usual, she was only conscious that she could not relax in her effort, but the effort cost her more than she knew.

From that day, Sara was also conscious that there was a change in her mother. She noticed that she did not go out into the wood. Was it that the autumn days were becoming colder, and that therefore she had another meeting-place with her lover? for Sara never doubted that the man she had seen was a lover. But against this theory Sara noted, though without taking great interest in the fact,

that her mother seldom went out except to return calls or to saunter round the house, idly picking flowers for the drawing-room vases. She seemed not to care to go on the hills or in the village. So the autumn days wore slowly on, and Sara became pale and thin. She seemed to lose interest in her life; she felt herself becoming a machine, a machine that moved and answered as if worked by some hidden spring, set in motion without her own will consenting to it.

Her mother made no remarks about her looks, and Sara did not care much, but she could not help being struck by her own wan, pale face when she looked into the glass. Was she going to be ill? The idea was so new to her that she smiled in contempt. She had an intense longing to see her aunt and Virginia. Everybody seemed to forsake her, and she was so very, very

lonely. Her mind even began to long for Mr. Cobbin's re-appearance. He was so generous, so true, and he would, perhaps, be able to brush away all these strange cobwebs of misunderstanding. Not that Sara called Percival's conduct a misunderstanding. She felt sure that as soon as the obstacle was withdrawn he would come back to her, but it was the ignorance of what the obstacle might be which was so trying and so wearying. It was this dumb longing, and also a strange, nervous fear of some unknown harm, which was making her feel very depressed. She even sometimes allowed to herself that she felt very ill.

Then there was another strange feeling which came over her, and one which she could not explain to herself, so that she began to think she was becoming really very unreasonable. This was that her

mother, instead of not heeding in what way she spent her time, was now continually with her. Except when she was at her piano, she found herself unable to wander off to the hills. In a quiet way, Mrs. Beddoes was always looking after her. She asked her to drive with her every day, or she wished her to play to her in the evening. The days were drawing in, so that it was not easy to walk out after dinner, and the evenings seemed to Sara like interminable and successive night-mares. She paid afternoon visits to various houses, and often Sara heard the name of Lord Stretton mentioned, but she dared not show any special interest in the family, and, as she herself had not even seen Miss Osborne, she could not talk about her. Sara noticed that her mother was received very kindly by the county ladies. The permission had gone forth that the Beddoes might be

visited, and the county did not do things by halves. She and her mother even received invitations to dinner, but Mrs. Beddoes usually found some excuse for refusing these invitations. Indeed, she was so little desirous of pushing herself into society, that society began to think her a very charming woman. Sara was pronounced rather stupid, and people were not slow to remark that Miss Beddoes looked ill and was not at all attractive. They rather despised her for having money and for being so quiet, and among themselves the ladies said it was a pity that the mother was not the heiress, for she would have enlivened the neighbourhood, whilst Miss Beddoes appeared to be always in a brown-study. Visits were a sad trial to Sara. Though the result was not satisfactory she had to try to rouse herself, but she suffered afterwards for doing this

by having a bad headache. Her head was always aching, and this fact in itself was disheartening, for in the old days Sara did not know the meaning of the word headache.

So the days dragged painfully along. Her mother appeared not to notice that anything was amiss with her, and lived her life in smooth and happy idleness, usually wearing a smile on her face as if her thoughts were pleasant. Their conversation had become purely surface talk; but, otherwise, there was nothing extraordinary about her mother's behaviour, and Sara thought that the coldness must be her own fault. She mentally said that she alone was to blame for this great gulf fixed between them, that if she could throw off her own wretchedness and disappointment, then she might once more live in sympathy with her mother. When, how-

ever, she began to make the effort she found it was impossible. She never even reached the stage of speaking out in words. At times, indeed, she made imaginary pictures. She thought that she would go and kneel by her mother's side, and that she would put her arms round her as she had done at the villa, and that then she would ask her to tell her everything and to confide in her; but Mrs. Beddoes had hedged herself round, as it were, with an invisible charmed circle, beyond which Sara might not come. At last the girl fully realized that she was not loved, and the knowledge of this made her shrink into herself, and it made her also quite incapable of making any effort to deliver herself from the unseen bondage.

'I must go on and on like this till Percival comes to deliver me,' she thought. 'If only I felt well I could bear it better,

but I wonder if I am going to have a real illness? It is my own stupidity, I have no courage, I ought to be brave.'

Then the weary head sank down against the pillows of an easy-chair, and she remained passively doing nothing.

One day, when Mrs. Beddoes and her daughter had been asked to drink tea with the wife of a neighbouring squire, at the last moment and when the carriage was at the door, Sara made an effort to excuse herself from accompanying her mother.

'I have rather a bad headache to-day,' she said, wearily. 'I don't think that I can come.'

'You had better come, Sara, people will think you are ill.'

'No, of course, I'm not ill, but I could not say anything; I feel so stupid.'

Mrs. Beddoes looked annoyed, but as Sara made no effort to move, and because

it was already late, she left her, saying,

'The Mostyn Moores are very pleasant. You make a great mistake if you don't cultivate nice people.'

'I am sorry, I daresay I shall be all right when you come back.'

Left alone Sara did feel better, there seemed to be a fresher feeling round her solitude than when her mother was present.

The October sun was bright, for the afternoon was one giving no warning that winter was so near at hand.

Suddenly an impulse seized the girl. She would go home, the only real home she had. She wanted to see the rooms, even if they were desolate, where she had always found love. The idea grew, and gave her strength. She went quite quickly down the drive and soon reached the lodge. But to her surprise the lodge

was empty and the gate was locked. Sara felt angry. What business had the woman to go out? Harriet and her mother were not nice people. The gate was too high to climb, besides it was ornamented with gilded spikes, so Sara turned away.

'I hate this place,' said Sara to herself, impatiently.

Then she went round to the path through the wood. She knew a gap in the hedge not far from the Manor where she could get through. When at last she reached the Manor she felt very tired, but she found strength to go round by the garden. There was a deserted look about the place. The blinds were down, evidently Herringham only used the study. Where was he? She wanted to see him. If her aunt had been there she would have been tempted to say, 'Let me come home, take me away from the rectory,' but this was useless longing.

When she looked round the front garden she felt that she must go back, her mother would be displeased to find her out. Why should she mind? surely she might use her own discretion, was she not free? Then she smiled at herself for imagining such a thing! She was not free at all. She felt like a prisoner. When she came of age she would go away, she would leave all the wretched money to her mother, she would beg her to take it and to let her go and work for her living. She thought longingly of the college life which she had hastily given up, and of the poverty which she had often laughingly deplored.

At that moment Herringham himself stood before her, and for an instant they looked at each other face to face. Then he exclaimed, 'Sara, are you here alone? Good heavens! what is the matter? You look so ill.'

'Nothing, nothing, I am not ill. I am only stupid, I have had a headache. Dear Herringham, it is nice to see you. Give me your arm. I am tired, tell me when are they coming back? They have been away a long, long time.'

'Yes, a long time. They are coming home soon, I believe.'

'Soon—how soon?'

Herringham put his cousin's hand into his arm. The very touch of her gloved fingers gave him a thrill of pleasure. He too had been longing to see her, but his pride had kept him from crossing the threshold of the rectory; besides, his father had forbidden it.

'Mother said in a week or two. They enjoy the lakes now that there are so few tourists.'

'I am so glad, it is so long since uncle really had a good holiday.'

'Yes.'

There was a pause. Sara was stupidly thinking of nothing except that it was pleasant to hear Herringham's voice, and he was longing to say a thousand things, but felt tongue-tied.

'Walk back with me to the Old Oak gap; you know, Herringham, where we used to get into the wood. There is still that gap through the hollow tree, but it is well hidden.'

'Yes, I know, but I can't go in. Your mother might see me.'

Again Sara could not answer. She felt really ill and unable to collect her ideas; so the two walked on in silence, till Herringham burst out with the words,

'Sara, I hate this miserable farce.'

'Which farce?' Sara blushed, though she hardly knew why.

'This estrangement between us. It's

wicked. We have the best right to you. Hasn't this been always your real home? It's this beastly money that has made all the difference.'

'Yes, yes it is—I wish some one would take it all away.'

'I suppose that it must be, but oh, Sara, come back to us; leave your mother; I—I want you. Don't you know that? Don't you know that I would do anything, anything for your happiness, however hard it might be for me.'

Sara's hand trembled. She knew what he meant now. She was not the light, unthinking child that she had been a short year ago.

'Don't say that, Herringham, dear Herringham. I love you so much, so much, just as if you and I were own brother and sister.'

'Brother and sister!'

'Yes, that is it. My brother Herringham. I say it to myself up there, when I feel very lonely.'

'Then you do feel lonely?'

'Yes, yes; very, very lonely.'

He muttered something under his breath.

'Hush! I shall be all right. It will soon be over. When Aunt Lil comes back I shall not feel lonely. I want——How silly I am! But, Herringham, I must tell you. You know about—about Mr. Osborne?'

'Is it really true? I hoped—against hope.'

'You did not hope anything against him. He—I must tell you because you are my brother. We cared for each other the first time we met. I don't know why.

It was just put into our hearts, I suppose. I hardly knew it—and now—there is an evil fate against us. Now I may not hear from him or see him.'

'If he cared he would not allow that.'

'Yes, he would. There is something, I don't hardly understand about it all, but—it will come all right, only—— Let me lean against you a minute, Herringham.'

Sara had suddenly turned very pale, and Herringham was frightened.

'You don't look fit to get back alone. Sara, I believe you are ill.'

Sara forced herself to speak with energy, for she certainly had felt as if she were going to faint again.

'No, it's nothing. I had a fall one day—some time ago—since then I have not felt well. But it's nothing, for mother has not even noticed it.'

'Then she must be wilfully blind. You look wretchedly ill.'

'Come a little further. It is so nice feeling that you are with me.'

They went on, and passed into the wood through a hollow tree. If Sara had been feeling stronger she would have laughed at using their old entrance, and she would have begged Herringham not to come further, but now she really wanted his support.

'Are you sure he cares?' Herringham said, suddenly and fiercely.

'Cares! Oh, yes, of course he does, only his father and my mother are both against it.'

'Why?'

'Because, because—I don't know at all—it all seems such a senseless mystery. I think they fancy that we can't be sure of

our own minds; but when I come of age, then I shall be my own mistress.'

'Your mother won't think so.'

'I don't want to be undutiful. I will give her all my money; Percival won't care at all.'

'Are you sure?'

'Quite sure. Oh, Herringham, if I doubted him, then—I think I should die; but I don't doubt him at all.'

Herringham's brow clouded over.

'One can't trust an Osborne; I have heard father say so.'

'It is foolish to generalize. I daresay his father is odd, but Percival——'

Herringham resolutely tried to cast out his feeling of jealousy. It was a hard struggle, but Sara was dearer to him than his own wishes.

'I'm glad you can feel like that. It makes life easier and waiting easier.'

'I should think so!—Why doesn't Virginia write to me?'

'She says you tell her nothing.'

'Life is rather dull, there is nothing to tell. I'm getting stupid, that's it.'

'Are you? I can't go further. I must leave you, dear. Shall you be all right now?'

'Yes.'

'Good-bye.'

'Good-bye.'

She held up her face as she always did; then, remembering what he had said she blushed.

'No, don't mind. Let me kiss you. We are brother and sister, anyhow.'

'Yes. Oh! Herringham, I do love you so much.—You know I do—all of you.'

Instead of walking back through the wood Herringham got out upon the mountain side, and then by taking a longer round

he came down upon the village and rang at the doctor's bell. Dr. Douglas was at home. He was a kindly, middle-aged man, a little old-fashioned in his ideas, but clever after his fashion. He was sitting in his study.

'Herringham! Hulloa! Have you come to dine with us and have a game of whist?'

'Yes, if you will have me.'

Herringham did not care for solitude to-day.

'That's right. My wife will be delighted.'

'I want you to do something else. Will you call on Mrs. Beddoes at the rectory, and see my cousin Sara? she looks very unwell.'

'But they haven't sent for me.'

'No, only do go, please; make some excuse. Sara is ill, certainly. Her mother only thinks of herself.'

'I have heard that Mrs. Beddoes was charming. I have not seen her, however.'

'Men like her. She is very pretty, but she is not fit to take care of her daughter. A few months ago Sara was as strong as—as a horse.'

'Well, for your sake, I'll go and see. Yes, Sara and I are old friends; my wife was rather hurt that she was not more welcomed by the two ladies.'

'Don't be hurt with Sara; she is a slave to her mother.'

'Well, well, I'll go. Now come into the dining-room.'

CHAPTER III.

A DOCTOR'S PRESCRIPTION.

The post came in late the next day, and Mrs. Beddoes looked a little impatient as she poured out the coffee. Sara felt somewhat brighter, or rather somewhat more able to keep up an appearance, because the meeting with Herringham had done her good. Lumb suddenly opened the door and brought the letters on a silver tray. The impeccable butler was more silent than ever, but nothing seemed to escape his eyes. He scrutinized Sara's face every morning as if he meant to en-

quire whether she felt better. It was wonderful how much Lumb found out without ever questioning anyone, for he never gossiped with the other servants. He had the keen observation of an Indian cow-tracker.

There were only two letters this morning, one for each of the ladies.

'Why, that is Mr. Profitt's writing,' said Mrs. Beddoes, as she handed over a letter to Sara. 'What can he want with you?'

But she did not wait for an answer, for her own letter soon absorbed her interest. It was from Lord Stretton. He wrote a letter or a note to her every day. Sara had seen the handwriting so often that she knew it quite well now, and she did not doubt that it must belong to that unknown lover. Of course he must be absent, as there were no more meetings in the wood.

Something in the letter evidently an-

noyed Mrs. Beddoes, so thought Sara; for, looking up, she saw her mother's lips pressed firmly together. She knew the sign now quite well, it always made her tremble a little, though she called herself foolish for minding a feeling which was not often expressed in words.

'Well, what does that foolish little man want, Sara?'

Sara handed the letter to her mother.

'Isn't it nice? He says that Mr. Cobbin will most likely be home before Christmas. He has had a telegram.'

'Not nice at all. That tiresome man was more than I could stand.'

Mrs. Beddoes rose quickly, in order to save a little fly that had dropped into a jar of honey; she took it out with the end of a silver teaspoon. Her white taper fingers would have delighted an artist had he been watching her. Sara, who looked on

in silence, wondered at the thoughtful interest her mother displayed over the welfare of a fly. Her heart craved for some, if only a little, of this same sympathy.

'I think that, when Mr. Cobbin comes back,' continued Mrs. Beddoes, 'we must really let him know that he cannot dangle after us any longer. In a country place like this, his continual company would become insufferable.

'When I am of age,' said Sara, a vivid colour flushing into her face, 'I shall ask him to come and stay with my friends.'

This was the first time Sara had openly rebelled, but her mother's words had touched her to the quick. Mr. Cobbin had done unnumbered kind things for them, and gratitude was strongly developed in the girl's nature. Mrs. Beddoes could hardly believe her ears. She needed to assure herself that she had

heard rightly, by looking at her daughter's blushing face, before she answered,

'Do you mean to say, Sara, that you have found my—my authority so unbearable that you wish to throw it off? I admire your gratitude.'

The strong scorn thrown into her words could not be hidden even by the soft tones of her voice.

'I don't want to be ungrateful or undutiful, mother, but—but I can't bear to appear to slight Mr. Cobbin's affection, when he has been so intensely kind to us.'

'The favour was all on my side,' said Mrs. Beddoes, speaking very slowly. 'He came here a mere unknown, bearish individual, and I consented to take him into a society that he was very unfit to be seen amongst.'

'Then it was the society that was in

the wrong,' said Sara, still clinging to what she thought right, for this had nothing to do with her own personal likings or with her own life. 'But it was not true, for most of the people I met were very nice to my Guardian.'

The meaning of these last words could not be lost on a woman like Mrs. Beddoes. It roused and accentuated every evil thought sho had ever possessed against this girl, the girl who should have been as the apple of her eye. How dared she, Sara, assert herself by reminding her mother that she was the heiress, and that the guardian was hers? Sara, who had always been so meek to her, so outwardly pliable, so devoted to her! Though Lucy did not want the girl's love, she felt angry at this sign of its waning power. There was a flash in her eyes which even Sara could not mistake, but Mrs. Beddoes

firmly pressed her lips together, and said nothing.

After breakfast, Sara was on the point of going upstairs to her piano, when Lumb announced that Dr. Douglas was in the drawing-room, and that he wished to see Miss Beddoes.

'Dr. Douglas! Did you send for him, Sara?' asked Mrs. Beddoes, with a slight flush.

'I? Oh, no, why should I?'

Immediately, however, Sara was sure that this was Herringham's doing. She was afraid that the doctor, an old friend of hers, would betray her. Mrs. Beddoes led the way to the drawing-room, and immediately she was a changed woman. Even Sara, slow to think evil, noticed this, but she put it down to another motive.

'I always irritate mother. It is something in me,' said the girl.

'How do you do, Dr. Douglas? You did not ask for me, but you see, all the same, I have come to see you.'

Never had Mrs. Beddoes been more gracious, and the doctor, being a man, thawed under the sweet tones of the pretty woman.

'I acknowledge my fault, but I was passing by, and I came to see Miss Sara. I noticed her last Sunday in church. She looked much too pale. There you are! You hear that I have come unbidden to see you?'

Sara blushed, for she guessed that this was Herringham's doing. But of what use was it to see a doctor, when her illness was the result of mental sadness and loneliness? The very fact of seeing Dr. Douglas made the truth more evident. She felt tired and ill with the suspense which makes the heart sick and the spirits weary.

Life had promised her so much, and had given her so little. In a short space of time, she had every good thing life has to offer poured into her lap, and then suddenly she had found all that she held to be mere delusion. Money had brought her no happiness. A mother's love and a comfortable home had become things that vanish at the touch, and love, towards which all young things aspire and stretch out their hand, had also vanished, and, if she still believed in it, the feeling only added to her sorrow.

It was all this that had made her ill, but nothing should make her acknowledge the cause of her sadness.

'Indeed, Dr. Douglas, you must not expect a patient in me; I am well, quite well.'

'Well! What nonsense! You are as weak as——What have you been doing? I shall give you a strong tonic.'

'I have never taken a tonic in my life,' said Sara, smiling.

'You must begin at once, then, otherwise we should find you walking into the arms of a real illness. I am glad I came.'

A few more questions, and then Dr. Douglas repeated,

'Yes, certainly, you shall take a preparation of arsenic. I have known that work wonders. I'll send you the prescription.'

'Thank you,' said Sara, feeling scornful. What could medicine do for her when she had that great feeling of inexpressible sorrow at her heart? She was so unused to sorrow, that she had at first struggled against it, now it seemed useless to rebel, and she was beginning to accept it, every now and then still trying to rouse herself with the words, 'When I am of age.'

'You must go out more. The weather

is chilly, but exercise is a fine thing. Why, I remember when you and Virginia walked fifteen miles daily.'

'Young people are very imprudent,' said Mrs. Beddoes, taking off the white cambric handkerchief thrown over her embroidery frame, and beginning to work at it. The October sun was piercing through a faint mist, and just lighted upon her hair. Dr. Douglas forgot Sara in looking at the graceful figure of her mother.

'You don't want me any more, do you?' said Sara, seeing his gaze. 'My music-master is coming this morning.'

'No, no, I'll send you the prescription. I want a few words with your mother. Young people are so senseless. Good-bye, and I'll come again.' He shook hands with Sara, and she went slowly out of the room.

Mrs. Beddoes did not look up as she said,

'What do you think of Sara, Dr. Douglas? The fall of the leaf often makes young people feel depressed.'

'I think Miss Sara is very much out of health. A strange loss of power in one so young. We must fetch her up at once. You can get the prescription made up as a powder or in pills.'

'Sara does not like pills. She never did as a child, she could not swallow them.' Mr. Beddoes smiled and the doctor laughed.

'Young ladies with a fortune must be humoured. I suppose that there is no reason for this—loss of spirits. No love affair.'

'Nothing of any real consequence. All girls fancy themselves in love with somebody.'

'Nothing serious; well, I'm glad of that. I used to think formerly that Herringham Gwillian was very attentive to his cousin. But I don't approve of cousin marriages.'

'No, indeed, I should never allow it.'

She put down her needle, and looked down upon her lap. She caught sight of a beautiful ring the gift of Lord Stretton. It sparkled in the sunshine. Her lips were firmly pressed together, then she looked up suddenly.

'Need I be anxious about Sara's health?'

'No, no, I don't say that. Don't be anxious, but this weakness is just as well taken in time.'

'Just as well.'

'Perhaps she wants more society than she gets here.'

'She does not care about going out. We did plenty of that in London.'

'When the Gwillians come back she can walk out with Virginia. Your brother is taking a long holiday; I never knew him do such a thing before.'

The doctor knew that there was a coolness between the two families, and he wished to see what the widow would say. She looked so pretty and so gentle that he at once settled that 'it must be Gwillian's fault; a queer fellow, though excellent in the main.'

'Yes, my brother does not appreciate my presence evidently,' Mrs. Beddoes smiled.

'Oh, he has his cranks, but I know no one who is more respected. He is proud, though, and he never took pains to keep up his social position.'

'He disapproved of my marriage, and that made a coolness between us,' said the widow, as if she had guessed the doctor's thoughts.

'That was before my day, but I feel sure you did your duty, Mrs. Beddoes.'

She smiled at him with her eyes now, and he was at once conscious of the strange attractive power which she possessed in such a high degree.

'My life has had many thorns; I was hoping now to see the bloom of a few late roses.'

She turned her head, and looked out upon the distant view. Her profile was really charming, and differed materially from that possessed by Mrs. Douglas, a stout matronly lady.

'Beauty is a great power,' said the doctor to himself. 'I wonder that Mrs. Beddoes never married again. I am sure she is charming, quite charming.'

Aloud he answered her poetic sentence with the words,

'One can only associate rose-leaves

with you. The thorns belong to less sympathetic characters.'

There was a pause, then Lucy looked up again.

'You are very kind, Dr. Douglas, really very kind. I must thank you for coming in. You can send the prescription, and I can get it made up at the Stores.'

'Yes, yes, or at Allen and Hanbury's. You must put the powder, after meals, into a glass of sherry, or into coffee, or even into her food. I am sure that it will do her good.'

'It will be measured out?'

'Oh, yes. You can't make a mistake. Besides, too much would do harm instead of good.'

'Would do harm?'

'Naturally. Arsenic is a slow poison.'

'The very word poison alarms us non-medical folk.'

'All good things have evil properties in abuse not in use.'

'Isn't the world full of delightful maxims!' said Lucy, laughing softly. 'If I were clever I should try to compose a few more, but I fear the ground is all taken up.'

'If you composed them the others would make room for the new comers, Mrs. Beddoes. Well, I must go. I have several patients waiting for me, but I am transposing the common saying of duty first.'

Lucy rose, shook hands with the doctor and rang the bell. He went away much pleased with his visit. Sara's interests had brought him face to face with her charming mother, so he was quite grateful to Sara.

As he went out of the hall-door, he heard the sounds of music upstairs. He was no musician, but the music sounded sad to

him. At this moment Lumb opened the door for him.

'Nothing serious with Miss Beddoes, sir?'

He did not look interested, so that Dr. Douglas was surprised at the man's question.

'Serious? not yet. Oh, no, no, we shall soon set her up. Good morning.'

The drawing-room was very quiet when the doctor had gone. The fire burnt in a dull manner. The sun had retreated once more behind its curtain of white fog. Lucy stood quite still, and resting her hands on the back of a great arm-chair, she slightly bent forward and gazed out upon the mist. The distant hills had dispeared, only the meadows came out clearly, and they looked dull and uninteresting through the foggy atmosphere. She thought and thought; all her powers were

concentrated in one thought. It was not new to her, but this morning it had taken a new form. It would be impossible to follow its convolutions, but presently she murmured aloud,

'Sara has fretted herself into an illness.'

At last she went towards the fire and sat down, taking Lord Stretton's last letter from her pocket. It was a very cheerful letter, an outsider would have wondered why its contents had depressed Lucy so much, but such had certainly been the case. In the first place, her lover had filled two sides of his paper with descriptions of scenery. Lucy had barely read them. They made her feel impatient. Then he had gone on to describe a delightful family with whom they had made friends. The mother was a charming, intellectual woman, and the daughter had really

'chummed' with Clara. Clara appeared quite a different woman under the influence of nice people. There was some more in the same strain, which Lucy had skipped till she reached the name of Percival.

'Percival has devoted himself to me. He is a dear fellow. I know, my Lucy, that you will like him in time, and that you will think better of his love for Sara. I am sure that he never varies in his affection for her. Even if we have to wait longer, let us at least have the satisfaction of seeing our children happy.'

Lucy rose suddenly from her seat, and threw the whole letter into the fire.

'Fool!' she muttered, 'he is being influenced by his children again. No real reliance can be placed upon him unless one is always with him, always at his elbow. Oh, he is the same man that he was

formerly. I almost wish I didn't care. I almost wish I could—I could leave it all—all.'

The fire flame suddenly flashed into new life, and made the gems sparkle on her fingers. The sight brought back her courage.

'No, no, he can't draw back. He is pledged, quite pledged. It shall be, and—and nothing shall come in my way—nothing.'

CHAPTER IV.

ALONE.

November came in sulkily, cold, wet and foggy. It was as disagreeable as, at times, it can be in this country of England. The rectory, which was a melancholy house in the bright weather, was now quite lugubrious. The only chance of avoiding constant depression of spirits was to get out of it and of its grounds, and to seek for light and freedom of thought upon the mountain side, or in the quaint, picturesque village.

At times Sara longed to do this, but the wish never lasted long enough to help her to make the effort. She still struggled against the wretched feeling of depression, so foreign to her nature, which brought haunting images to her mind. She still painfully crawled downstairs to meals, but all the rest of the time she complained of headache, and when urged to come out said she preferred staying in her own sitting-room. Dr. Douglas had come again a few days later to examine his patient. He found no great change, and he said that she must perseveringly go on with her medicine. Unfortunately, a week later, the kind doctor was taken seriously ill with pleurisy, and when better he was ordered south. A young man, vulgar and bumptious, temporarily took the practice, whereupon Mrs. Beddoes asked Sara if she wished to see him.

'He is odious,' she said, 'but if you like——'

'No, no. I don't like him at all. He might alter Dr. Douglas's medicine.'

'Dr. Douglas certainly said you must persevere.'

'Yes, one doesn't want to see an odious young man merely to hear him repeat that.'

So no new doctor came, and Sara now acknowledged to herself that she did not feel better, but, on the contrary, that she was more languid. Sometimes even she experienced acute pain, but she would not complain, it did not seem worth while even to do that. For some time she had buoyed herself up with the hope of seeing the Gwillians on their return, but again she was disappointed, and this time her disappointment was acute.

The news that the Manor was again inhabited made Sara exert herself. She

was not able to walk down to them, but a few days after their return she sent a note to her aunt, saying that she was going to ask her mother to let her drive down to the Manor. She longed to see them so much, so very much. But this was the answer she received, and which seemed to make her heart stop beating:

'My dearest Sara,

'I see you do not know what has happened. My poor child, how can I tell you? Yesterday, your mother herself, after refusing all this time, as you know, to come near us, drove up in her carriage to pay a formal call. Your uncle, unfortunately, was in the hall. They met. If only I had been there! But Virginia and I were out. It ended in your mother saying that if she was refused entrance, then you certainly should not cross this

threshold. I tell your uncle that anything was better than that, but he says that you must do as your mother wishes. Oh! my dear Sara, my heart aches for you. I know you will want to come, but patience, dear. Directly you are of age you must please yourself. Your uncle says so. Virginia sobbed herself to sleep last night, and Herringham says it is a shame. But we must do what your uncle says. God bless you, dear Sara. Write a line and tell me if you are really better. Herringham says that you have been out of sorts. We can't bear the look of Dr. Douglas's substitute, but do have him if you are not yet quite well.

'Your loving aunt,

'Lil.'

Sara could not believe in this new misfortune. To hear that she might not go

to the Manor, her one refuge, her one hope, made her feel quite hopeless. Evidently her mother wished to separate her from all those whom she loved. When she was of age, then—then—— She laid herself down on the sofa, feeling quite incapable of struggling against her fate. Then hope revived. She was very young, and somehow she must live through these next three months, and then all would come right. The strange labyrinth which she had entered with such a joyous smile upon her face had conquered her. She knew not now which was the right path or which way she ought to turn; she knew only that she felt very lonely. Why had God forsaken her? What had she done to deserve this? Why were all against her? She asked herself these questions again and again in a despairing manner, not expecting any answer, but still struggling to

be brave. She would not give in yet; she certainly felt ill, but the reason was that she was wearing herself out with her longings to see Percival, and to hear him say that he still loved her. She did not doubt him, but this silence, cruel as the grave, was very unnerving. And now she was cast off from the only real home which she had ever possessed.

It was lunch-time, and Sara, hearing the boom of the gong, felt that she must make the exertion to get up and go downstairs; she dreaded more than anything else breaking down physically, and having to cut herself off from the world, little as she saw of it or enjoyed it. Even ordinary callers gave her a feeling of confidence, such as a man on a raft feels when a little boat passes by; but this feeling faded as soon as the strangers stepped out of the house.

Downstairs everything looked dull, except where Mrs. Beddoes stood before a large fire, for there the light from the flames seemed to surround her with a warm artistic glow. Lumb was silently awaiting the arrival of his young mistress, and he watched her attentively as she slowly advanced to the table.

'November has put on its worst garment,' said Mrs. Beddoes, not looking at Sara, but gazing towards the window.

'Yes, it makes one feel wretched,' answered Sara from the depth of her heart.

Lumb began his duties, and there was silence in the room. Sara would have commanded him, had she had her own way, never to leave the room during mealtimes; but she certainly did not have her own way at all in this house. When Lumb left the ladies alone, Mrs. Beddoes seemed

preoccupied, and she still looked out of the window at quick intervals.

Sara tried to collect her scattered powers so as to rouse herself sufficiently to make an appeal that was causing her to feel strangely nervous, so anxious was she to speak out.

'Mother!' she said, suddenly.

Mrs. Beddoes quite started, her thoughts evidently having led her far away from the luncheon-table.

'You startled me.'

'Why did you go to see uncle, and then forbid my going there? You can't understand what they are to me; I am sure you can't, or you would not be so—so cruel.'

Lucy raised her head proudly.

'I don't know why you should question me, Sara. As long as you live with me, you must conform to my wishes.'

'I have done so always, mother.'

'Even when you met Mr. Osborne on the hill? I don't wonder you never mentioned it to me, if you call that conforming to my wishes.'

Sara blushed painfully, but her conscience was too guiltless not to defend herself. Even at this moment, however, she wondered how her mother had found out that she had seen Percival.

'We met by accident.'

'A convenient phrase.'

Sara bit her lip.

'I have never told a lie, you know it, mother, but now you have deprived me of my last comfort.'

'You once begged me to make a home for you. You have changed your ideas in a very short time, Sara, simply because your elders wish to prevent your making a marriage which has insuperable drawbacks.'

'Insuperable drawbacks! Mother tell me, tell me what they are.'

Sara rose slowly from her chair. Her face, now usually so pale, flushed all over. She looked at her mother, and saw the cold steel-like look in her eyes, and then she knew that she would get no response to her cry of despair.

'If I could have told you, I should have done so before now. I once hoped that you—that you——'

'I did trust you, mother—I do, but—it is very hard to be left entirely in the dark.'

Mrs. Beddoes apparently was not listening. As Sara moved away, however, she recalled her.

'You are forgetting your medicine. By the way, I forgot to show you Dr. Douglas' note. It came this morning.'

She took up a note from the table, and

handed it to Sara, whilst she herself went to fetch a little box full of powders that was standing on the sideboard.

'He says I am to go on with the powders. I don't think they do me any good,' said Sara.

Mrs. Beddoes began to pour out a little strong coffee in a cup, then she walked to the sideboard turning her back to her daughter. Sara sauntered slowly to the window and looked out at the cold fog which enveloped the land. It seemed to agree well with her present state of mind. She heard the door open, and knew that Lumb had entered, so she turned round to take her tonic.

Mrs. Beddoes held the cup in her hand, and as Sara was taking it she said,

'Wait a minute I have not put this powder in;' then unfolding a tiny, white

paper packet she emptied its contents into the coffee.

'How nasty it is!' said Sara, draining the cup.

'If you please, ma'am, I should be glad if you could spare me a day to go and see my wife in town,' said Lumb, addressing Mrs. Beddoes. 'Any day this week. My wife has been ill.'

'Oh, yes, certainly, Lumb. Any day you like. Ellen can wait on us, for no visitors are coming. The weather is too dull to ask anyone to come to the country.'

Lumb lifted a silver dish from the table—it was a present from Mr. Cobbin—and went out of the room.

'Would you mind my leaving you for a day, Sara? I want to go to London. If I can get back the same evening I certain-

ly shall, but I don't think it will be possible.'

Sara looked at her mother as if the words did not penetrate into her brain.

'Did you hear me?' said Mrs. Beddoes.

Sara made another effort to rouse herself.

'Oh, yes, yes, please go, I shall be all right.'

'Then I will go to-morrow. Your music-master comes then.'

'I have a headache to-day, I think I'll go and lie down,' was Sara's answer.

Mrs. Beddoes made no comment, and Sara walked slowly upstairs. Her one conscious feeling, the feeling which swallowed up all the others, was,

'I want to go home to the Manor. I want Aunt Lil and Virginia. How long can I keep away? Yet I dare not go, mother would be so displeased, and I have

never told a lie, I can't deceive her—I can't.'

Instead of sitting down to the piano, Sara took up a book, wrapped a cloak round her, and threw herself languidly on the sofa. She knew afterwards that in the course of the morning her mother came into the room, and then that she softly went out. She was also conscious that Harriet came and made up the fire, but the only time that she roused herself was when Lumb entered, carrying a newspaper on a tray. It was very strange of Lumb to bring the paper to her, she thought, so she sat up a little.

'I'm afraid you don't feel well, ma'am,' remarked Lumb.

To hear Lumb make a remark unbidden made her look up.

'No, I am not very strong, thank you, Lumb.'

'It's a pity Mr. Cobbin isn't returned,' continued Lumb.

'Oh, he couldn't make me well,' said Sara, smiling, 'but I do wish he was back again.'

'When do you expect him, ma'am?'

'Mr. Profitt said that perhaps by Christmas time or in January he would be here. He has delayed his return for some reason or other.'

'If you were to give me Mr. Profitt's address, I might call and inquire for the latest news of him.'

Sara's face brightened.

'Oh, Lumb, do please, yes; I should be glad. There is a card of his on that table. The address is on it.'

Lumb respectfully brought it to his young mistress.

'Yes, that's it. Thank you; and oh, Lumb, I want to say something to you.

Don't tell anyone, but suppose—I have been feeling very unwell, suppose I—anything should happen to me before Mr. Cobbin returns, tell him that the thought of him was always a great pleasure to me. Will you remember that? I am sure you will, because you never forget anything.'

'Yes, ma'am, I'll remember.'

Lumb showed no surprise at Sara's words, and took the remark as if it were quite a natural thing for her to say. Then he went out of the room as noiselessly as he had entered it.

'A perfect servant, certainly,' thought Sara, lying down again. 'I wonder if I am going to die? I don't seem to care much. I shouldn't suffer any more, or long and long for the sight of *him* any more, or for dear Aunt Lil. Death isn't very dreadful, after all. I think it would be oh! such a rest not to feel so tired.

How shall I get down to lunch, I wonder?'

The mist did not clear all that day, and Sara did not get down to tea, but Lumb brought it up to her. Her mother looked in with her medicine, and the rest of the afternoon she dozed at intervals.

Down in the servants'-hall there were, of course, remarks made about Miss Sara's illness.

'I'm sure Miss Sara is very unwell,' said the housekeeper. 'She looks that pale I wonder her mother don't send for a London doctor.'

'Dr. Douglas wrote this morning,' said Harriet. 'He is prescribing for her, but young ladies get hysterical. It's a love-affair as makes them like that. I was like it too, once.'

Lumb attentively looked at Harriet. His solemn face always annoyed her; besides, Lumb never flirted.

'That was some time ago, Miss Smith.'

Harriet tossed her head.

'Lor', Mr. Lumb, what do you know of ladies' nerves? I expect Mrs. Lumb have not got nerves.'

'No, she hasn't,' said Lumb, 'and when I go and see her to-morrow I hope I'll not find that she has developed them.'

He said nothing more about Miss Sara, and the subject dropped.

CHAPTER V.

LUMB'S LONDON VISIT.

Mr. Profitt was sitting in his office busily engaged in looking over the title-deeds of a client who was just dead. He did not wish to be disturbed, so when the office factotum came to tell him that Mr. Lumb desired to see him he was not over-much pleased.

'Lumb—who is Lumb?' Then he recollected. 'Oh, Mrs. Beddoes' butler. Show him in, Wilson.'

Mrs. Beddoes' name recalled such pleasant thoughts that he no longer hesitated. Be-

sides Sara Beddoes' affairs meant much profit in the future. The title-deeds were put away, and Mr. Lumb presently stood before him.

'Oh! How do, Lumb?' said Mr. Profitt, nodding condescendingly, his high squeaking voice sounding unequal to the burden of his large person. 'Is Mrs. Beddoes in any trouble, or how can I oblige the ladies?'

'I've come on my own account, sir,' said Lumb; and Mr. Profitt's bad temper returned.

'Oh! indeed. I am very busy, so don't waste words, my good fellow.'

Lumb did not sit down, but he simply looked at Mr. Profitt for a moment as if he were taking in his worth, and as if to reproach him for suggesting that he, Lumb, ever wasted words.

'When does Mr. Cobbin return, sir? He engaged me.'

'Oh, is that it? You wish to leave? I think I can manage that business for you. There are hundreds ready to step into your shoes.'

'No, sir, it's not that, but I wish to speak to Mr. Cobbin. If you don't mind telegraphing to him, "Come home," I'll feel obliged.'

Mr. Profitt laughed.

'To oblige you, I fear I can't. The expense is considerable, besides——'

'Then, perhaps, you'll give me his direction, sir?'

'Certainly, but I fear your letter would cross him on the way. There has been a little delay, a business delay. He has not said what it is, but in any case he will come back for Miss Sara's coming of age. He said so. I advise you to keep all complaints and a good place till then.'

'Yes, sir, I was going to.'

'Here is his address. How is Mrs. Beddoes? Well, I hope.—A charming lady.'

'Mistress seems well, sir. She's her own affairs to attend to.'

'Ah! Well, good morning.'

Mr. Profitt rang his bell, and Wilson was soon gazing after Lumb's stiff, retreating figure.

'Tiresome fellow,' muttered Mr. Profitt, returning to his deeds. 'Why didn't I send to ask him his business before letting him in?'

As Lumb walked out his mental remark was,

'That fat gentleman with the little voice is not a man I should choose for doing my business. He don't see through female beauty. I'm that puzzled, I'd ask anyone I could think of, but mum's the word. Miss Sara's too patient.'

Lumb knew a great deal more than Mrs. Beddoes expected him to know. He was aware of all her meetings in the wood with Lord Stretton, and, besides, Lumb was a born thinker. He knew too a great deal about Percival, but that knowledge had been easily acquired.

'There's ways of cabling, and I'll stand expense. Cobbin's a gentleman, and he'll repay me.'

Lumb did not only think, he set about getting information on the subject of cables and telegraphs which took up a deal of his time. When at last he had finished his business, he found himself walking through Regent Street on his way to visit his daughter and his wife. Lumb had an only daughter who worked in a Regent Street millinery establishment. Lizzie Lumb was as the apple of his eye,

and he never failed to come and see her when he could.

Very soon he was waiting for her in a small room on the ground floor of Madame Kolh's shop. In another minute Lizzie appeared, and certainly the sight of her would have done good to any human being; so pretty, so bright, and so cheerful was she.

'Well, father, this is a pleasure,' she cried, hugging him. 'Wherever have you come from, you dear old duckie? I thought mother and me were never going to see you again. How's your rich young lady, and when are you going to send her here to buy her wedding hats?'

'Well, my dear, that's not my department. Miss Sara looks more like going to her own funeral than to her wedding; besides, it's all off.'

'All off! Well, I never! Do you know, father, that I've got a young man?'

'You had one, Lizzie, the last time I saw you.'

'Yes, but this is another. Just as handsome and pleasant as ever you like. We have fine times.'

'And the other, Lizzie?'

Mr. Lumb shook his head reprovingly.

'Well, the other, he don't like it much; but lor! father, he was that talkative I couldn't get in a word edgeways.'

Mr. Lumb smiled in spite of his pretended anger.

'Lizzie, you're a dreadfully changeable girl. It's very wrong.'

'I always keep of one mind about you and mother, father. When's your old Australian returning?'

'Soon, I hope; I want him back again.'

'Poor Miss Sara! Is her mother an old cat? You said so once.'

'I never said so, Lizzie; I never call a lady a cat.'

'No, but your face said so for you. Your face is real speaking. I expect she is a *very* old cat, or you would look different.'

'She is young and pretty, Lizzie, and the men like her uncommonly. She can twist them round her little finger.'

'She can't twist you, father. You're solid.'

'I hope I am. I'm going home now, Lizzie. I'd like to talk to your mother; she's more sense in her than a dozen men.'

'Mother is sharp. She knows always if I've changed my beau.'

'We don't approve of your conduct, Lizzie.'

'No, you don't, but where's the harm? I tell them plain out when we begin to keep company that I can't keep to one, and I soon seem to get tired of them, so it's all fair, and this one knows it. He's more like you, father. He says very little.'

'Well, good-bye, Lizzie: are you happy here?'

'Yes: as if I should stay if I wasn't! Madame's very good to us, and she says that I've the cleverest fingers in this house. She wouldn't part from me on no consideration.'

'You think a deal too much of yourself, Lizzie;' and, so saying, Mr. Lumb took leave of his daughter, enduring a hug and many kisses with great fortitude.

His smile had hardly faded on his lips, when looking up he saw his mistress walking a few yards in front of him. Lumb

could not be mistaken as to her identity. Even in a crowd she looked a remarkable woman. Her gliding manner of walking, the cut of her clothes, indeed everything about her, marked her out as a woman who unconsciously attracted attention, and the butler noticed several men who turned and looked after her as she passed them. Lumb had left Chapel Stacey very early, but he now remembered that Harriet had said something about her mistress soon going to town, and there she was. Miss Sara would be alone. No great misfortune in Lumb's mind. As he slowly followed her, he saw that Mrs. Beddoes paused before a shop-window. Some instinct which he could not account for made him pause also. He was himself in front of a milliner's shop, and his vivid interest in bonnets, even for Lizzie's sake, could not last long. From the corner of his eye

he kept Mrs. Beddoes in view. Presently he noticed that his mistress moved on a little, so he did the same. Then she suddenly turned and went back to the same shop-window. Lumb also turned quickly, fearing she might catch sight of him. When he next looked, she had finally gone into the shop. Lumb moved on and paused at the next shop; from there he could see that the shop his mistress had entered was that of a well-known chemist. If she wanted to go in, why had she paused so long before doing so?

Lumb turned this over in his mind several times. He wanted to see if she came out soon, or if she had much further business. But neither did he wish to be discovered; and, the next shop being a confectioner's, Lumb quickly entered it, bought a fruit tartlet—Lizzie called it 'a penny open,'—and, putting himself where

he could see and not be seen, he ate his dainty morsel as slowly as he could. He finished that tartlet, and had to buy another, this time 'a penny shut,' before he saw his mistress go past the window; so, swallowing the remains of the second in one mouthful, he also went out.

Mrs. Beddoes was again walking a little way in front of him; again he noted her graceful motion as she slowly sauntered up the lively street. Lumb began to think that he could not waste any more time in this way. He wished to see his wife, and if possible to return by the late train to Chapel Stacey. Just as he was considering if he should cross the street, he saw that Mrs. Beddoes had again stopped in front of a shop-window. This time her indecision did not last as long as on the former occasion, and again Lumb, passing

by, saw that she had entered another chemist's shop.

'She hasn't apparently got all she wants, but that last shop sold all physics. She wants more of what she has got, I suppose. Yes, that's it, Lumb.'

Lumb's patience returned. He waited till Mrs. Beddoes again came out of the shop, and then he saw that she walked on at a much quicker pace, and that her next pause was before a shop in the windows of which ladies' beautiful costumes were exhibited. In another moment she entered and was lost to sight. When Lumb passed the spot he read the announcement that trousseaux and wedding gowns were here made to perfection.

'If it's for Miss Sara, it's my belief she'll never live to marry anyone, but most likely it's for herself. I must consult my wife. She's sharper than most.'

Lumb now hastily crossed the street, and stepping into a 'bus he went to his own home.

It was quite late and a very dark night when Lumb let himself in by the back door of the rectory, which the cook had been told to leave unbolted. Lumb struck a match, and lighting a candle he found that his supper had been left ready for him.

He ate it with much deliberation, and when it was over he lighted a lamp and went to assure himself that all the door were locked and bolted. One of these visits of inspection took him into the dining-room. It looked very gloomy without a fire, and Lumb, putting down his lamp, gazed round it with a quick calculating manner.

'My missus says it's Miss Sara's money that I'm paid with and that she's the mis-

tress that I'm really serving. True and faithful service is a grand and simple motto. It's what Cobbin expected of me. It saves a world of trouble to remember it. Well, I'm glad my Lizzie is not shut up in this dull place, it's enough to make a man commit suicide.'

Lumb had muttered this remark aloud, and then, having again made sure that he was indeed alone, he went towards the sideboard where stood the box of powders. He deliberately opened it, and took out the neatly folded packets. On this box he read the names of Allen and Hanbury. Below was written, 'One powder to be taken twice a day after meals.'

'After breakfast and after lunch,' said Lumb. 'That's the times I notice Miss Sara has them given to her. Lor'! doctor's stuff is a snare and a delusion. The old gentleman has generally had his hand in

the mixture. I've never been ill that I can remember in my life, and, thank the Lord, never a dose of nastiness have I taken. Poor Miss Sara, she'd be a deal better without these nasty things, a deal better.' He counted the remaining powders; there were only eight. 'That will last four days,' he said. 'Poor young lady; Lizzie shall never swaller any stuff of this kind. Why, Miss Sara has been getting worse and worse ever since she took 'em. It's Cobbin we want back—a man that is clear as the day. Wife says I'm romancing, but all the same the old lady was cute. "Count 'em, Lumb," she said to me, "and—and—"

Some accidental noise made Lumb start as if he were a thief. He put back the powders and hastily retired to bed, his room being on the ground-floor.

The next morning the rectory household

felt very much as if they might enjoy a real holiday from restraint. Though the widow was a first-rate housekeeper, she had almost too much penetration to be really popular with servants. No small mistake or irregularity was over-looked, so that with all her softness and gentleness she was in truth a severe mistress.

Sara, as well as the servants, woke up with a sense of relief. She had the energy to drag herself up and to go down stairs to breakfast, for there was a vein of heroism in the girl which would not accept defeat. She knew that she could expect no letter from Percival, but perhaps Virginia might have written her a note, as the post was now their only means of communication. When Lumb entered with the urn, Sara, looking up, saw his eyes fixed upon her.

'I hope you feel better, ma'am,' he said

solemnly, as he laid the letters on the table beside her.

'Thank you, Lumb, yes, I'm better. Is there a letter for me? Oh! a card from mother. She wants the carriage to meet the afternoon train from town: will you please tell the coachman?'

'Yes, ma'am!'

There were several letters for Mrs. Beddoes, one in the usual handwriting, and Sara put them all on the writing-table. She ate very little, for lately she could not eat without a sensation of sickness, and then she returned upstairs feeling that she could not face the dreary drawing-room. In her own room she could lie down and dream, that is, when sudden attacks of pain did not disable her even from thought. Later in the day, however, there was a note from Virginia brought in to her.

'DARLING SARA,

'I dare not come and see you as you suggest. Father says that when you are of age you must come here. Till then he won't have any communication. Are you better? Tom Carter said that he had seen you at the window, and that you looked like a ghost. I know that you are fretting, but please don't. It is not worth making yourself ill. Mother sends her dear love, and Herringham is very cross. He says that the station-master happened to mention to him that Mrs. Beddoes had gone to town for a night. If only I could fly over and spend the evening with you, dear; but I dare not! Father would find it out. In a very little while you must come back home. Caradoc is pining for you, and so am I. The place is so dull, and every minute I keep expecting you to walk in. I must not say all

that I think, because it would hurt you; so, with many sweet kisses, I remain,

'Your loving,

'VIRGINIA.'

The note cheered her for a little while. Then one of the attacks of pain to which she was now for the last month so subject returned, and for a long time she felt utterly prostrate, but she managed to struggle through it, determined not to ring for Harriet. It was strange, she thought, that her mother never appeared to notice her looks. It must be that she herself was getting dreadfully morbid. Besides, she did not care much now what happened to her; she felt too ill to care.

The luncheon-bell rang, but Sara sent word that she wanted nothing but a little milk, which Lumb himself brought her.

Downstairs Lumb was being questioned

about his day in town, and also various speculations were aired in his presence concerning Miss Sara's strange illness, but Lumb answered nothing but 'Oh,' and 'Indeed,' or other equally unsatisfying rejoinders, so that Harriet declared that Mr. Lumb was a close man, a very close man, at which Lumb smiled grimly, for he was very proud of being called 'a close man.'

When she had sipped a little milk Sara fell into an uneasy sleep till she was roused by the sound of carriage wheels. It was the carriage bringing back Mrs. Beddoes from the station.

CHAPTER VI.

COMING HOME.

It was getting dusk, and a drizzling rain was falling, when Mrs. Beddoes returned home. Outwardly nothing was changed. A pile of letters awaited her on the hall table, and her slender fingers gathered them up with that motion of appropriation possessed by some women in a very noticeable manner. Lumb was, as usual, waiting in the hall ready to help her to take off her fur cloak. She wore a new boa which she had bought in London. It was a

long one made of dark shining skunk, and when she unfastened the bow it slipped down from her neck, coiling itself at her feet like a sleepy serpent. Lumb picked it up and gave it to her. He also noticed that his mistress had on a new bonnet. It was for love of Lizzie that he always took such an interest in ladies' bonnets; but, besides new bonnets, very few other things escaped his calm searching eyes.

'Have there been any callers since I left?' said Mrs. Beddoes.

Lumb had happily informed himself on this point, and gave the required information.

'Mrs. Muir-Mullens called, ma'am. Here is her card.'

'Ah! Nothing else has happened? Where is Miss Sara?'

'Upstairs, ma'am, in her sitting-room.'

'Bring the tea in the drawing-room.

Callers may arrive. Oh, give these parcels to Harriet, please.'

As if to fulfil her prophecy, there was heard the sound of carriage wheels, and Mrs. Beddoes went swiftly upstairs. One end of her new boa had fallen from her hand and dragged behind her, looking very much like a snake gliding upstairs. Arrived at the sitting-room door, Mrs. Beddoes paused. She almost held her breath and listened. There was no sound to be heard, so she tried to open the door, but she found it was locked.

'Are you there, Sara? Why do you lock the door?'

There was a soft rustle of long skirts audible, and then Sara came forward to open the door. She looked deadly pale, and there were dark rings round her eyes, adding to her deadly pallor, but her mother made no comment on her appearance.

'Please don't lock your door again, Sara. I have such a horror of fire. There are callers just come, so I mustn't stop. Are you coming down to tea?'

Mrs. Beddoes had made a slight feint of kissing her daughter. There was, however, no pretence at hiding the chilliness of the greeting. Sara looked the shadow of her former self; even her bright hair seemed dulled and lustreless, and her white hands trembled a little.

'Was it wet in London?' she asked, though she could not have told why she made this remark more than any other.

Mrs. Beddoes went towards the looking-glass, and began taking off her long, black gloves, and, by instinct, she examined her rings, as she answered,

'Yes, quite horrid. The country is bad enough, but London! I never went out at all except that I drove to my dress-

maker, and then I lunched with some old friends.'

At this instant Lumb made his appearance at the door, which Mrs. Beddoes had left a little ajar.

'Colonel and Mrs. Kelton,' he said.

'Oh, yes, of course. You had better come down, Sara.' Mrs. Beddoes did not look at her daughter as she said this, but she began walking towards the door.

'I don't feel equal to much talking,' said Sara. 'I think, if you don't mind, I'll have tea upstairs.'

'Really, Sara, you are becoming quite hypochondriac. Dr. Douglas said your thoughts should be distracted from yourself, but you now refuse to see anyone.'

Lumb had waited to let his mistress pass him, and heard her last words. He looked into Sara's room before shutting her door, and noticed that his young mis-

tress merely sank down again upon the sofa without saying anything more.

'Shall I bring you a cup of tea, ma'am?' he asked, in a kind, gentle voice. He could not bear to see her looking so ill.

'Thank you, Lumb. Please do. By-the-way, did you hear news of—Mr. Cobbin?'

'No, ma'am, Mr. Profitt didn't know anything more, but he may be on his way home.'

'I hope he is, I want to see him very much. Thank you, Lumb.'

'No cause to, miss,' said Lumb, and softly shutting the door he disappeared.

'I'll bring the tea up myself,' thought Lumb. 'I have no great opinion of Miss Harriet, and my missus said, "Keep an eye on her."'

Accordingly, Lumb soon reappeared with

a tempting tea-tray. Sara was still on the sofa, and to his mind she looked extremely ill.

'Wouldn't you like to see the doctor, ma'am?' he asked. 'I could run down to the village this evening and ask him to come.'

Sara sat up a little, and looked at him. She now always seemed to have a difficulty in taking in quickly what was said to her.

'The doctor? the new man? Oh, no, no. Dr. Douglas will soon be back. I would rather wait for his return. Thank you, Lumb, I don't seem to care for anything to eat!' She pushed away the buttered toast, but eagerly drank the tea.

'You had better eat a little, miss. My Lizzie, when she was ill, had to be made to eat.'

'How is she?' said Sara, looking up with more interest than she had yet shown.

'Very bonny. I wish you looked as well, ma'am.'

'Thank you, Lumb, I expect I don't make enough effort. My mother says so, but I have tried. If I rest now, perhaps I can get down to dinner. I expect then that I shall be all right.'

'Yes, ma'am;' and Lumb slowly left the room.

'She's very ill, it seems to me,' he said to himself. 'A mother as was worth the name would see it.' He went into the dining-room, and, peeping out to see that the carriage was still at the door, he looked into the box. Miss Sara had had one powder brought to her after breakfast, and one after lunch. He opened it and found

it full. 'Humph!' he thought, 'I'll count them.'

He was just beginning this task when the drawing-room bell rang. Hastily putting them all back he went to the hall-door. After that he decided to wait till he laid the cloth. When he did so the box was gone, and Lumb was much perturbed by this discovery. That possibility had not occurred to him. He must find out where it had been put, but in the meanwhile he kept his eyes open.

Sara's strength of will was certainly exemplified that evening, for with Harriet's help she had managed to dress. She wore a dress of pale green crêpe, trimmed with a softer shade of silk. It usually suited her colouring to perfection, but to-day it added, if possible, to the pallor of her face. She looked like some pale ghost

of herself returned to earth. Lumb certainly handed her dainty morsels, but he noticed that she merely played with her knife and fork till her mother remarked,

'Really, Sara, it is rather ludicrous that you should reject your food. How can you expect to get stronger? You will starve yourself to death.'

As she said this, Mrs. Beddoes paused and took up the pepper-box, giving it a vigorous shake to season her vegetables. Sara cut a little chicken and forced herself to eat it.

'I don't feel hungry. When the weather gets brighter——'

'It is not the weather, but your own fancies. If you make yourself seriously ill, you must blame no one else.'

Sara looked across at her mother, intimating by an appealing look that Lumb was present, then she tried to force another mouthful into her mouth.

'I really do try to get better. I even remembered the powders when you were away.'

Sara smiled, but it was merely the ghost of her former smile.

'Oh, yes, I got some more in London. It saves writing for them.'

Sara did not seem to take any interest in this fact except that she answered,

'They don't do me any good.'

'You are a foolish girl to think you know better than a doctor. Do you wish to leave them off?'

'I don't mind,' said Sara, languidly.

She found the effort to attend to conversation more than she could bear. She hastily pushed her plate away, and looked at Lumb as a sign to take it away.

'It's suicide,' remarked Mrs. Beddoes, looking at the plate.

Sara said nothing, and Mrs. Beddoes changed the topic.

'Those Keltons are interesting people. The colonel was in the Indian mutiny. He told me an exciting story,' and Mrs. Beddoes related it.

It was rather horrible, and had Sara dared she would have asked her mother to stop, but she tried not to listen. The meal appeared to her interminably long, and Lumb became like some ghostly appearance walking round and round the table. Would it ever end? Whatever her mother might say or think, she could not endure this ordeal again. She must give in. Life was not worth having at this rate of suffering. Her hold on it seemed fast slipping away. She did not want to die, but she felt that her strength was almost gone. It was this longing, this intense

longing for those she loved, that must be killing her. She was dying of loneliness, and—no, her mother would say that this was all nonsense.

Suddenly her mother rose. She had been eating an orange, and the odour of it permeated the room. As she stood up, she poured out for herself another glass of sherry and drank it off. It possessed a rich, aromatic flavour, for it was choice wine which Mr. Cobbin had procured for them. Mrs. Beddoes offered a glass to her daughter.

'No, thank you. It would make me feverish,' said Sara.

'What ridiculous ideas you have, Sara. —Have you practised much these last few days?'

'Oh no, I couldn't. I must put off Mr. Sutton. His lesson would be wasted.'

'You want rousing. However, as you reject my authority, I must leave you to go your own way.'

Sara looked up, and now for the first time she noticed that Mrs. Beddoes was wearing a beautiful new gown. It sparkled with jet, and it was made so becomingly that it added new charm to Mrs. Beddoes' perfect figure. Her hair, just coiled low down on the beautiful neck, was a thing of beauty and a joy to any artist's eye. Sara wondered why this very beauty only added to an undefined fear she now felt of her mother.

'You have a new dress on,' she remarked.

'Yes, I wondered that you did not notice it, but you are getting dreadfully unobservant.'

'I am afraid I am now. I—I feel so stupid.'

'I had better ask somebody to come and stay with us. You are very depressing, Sara, in your present state. If you roused yourself it would be more agreeable for me. I think I shall write to Mr. Greenwood.'

'Oh, mother! I'm sorry, I can't help it, but don't ask him.'

Mrs. Beddoes gave a tiny shrug of her shoulders, and passed on. Sara tried to follow, but when she was in the hall she paused. She positively could not go into the drawing-room to spend a whole long evening with her mother.

'Do you mind very much, mother? I feel as if I couldn't sit up this evening.'

'Oh, very well, and really you are not a cheerful companion. If you refuse to see a doctor and refuse to take care of yourself, what can I do?'

Sara understood that she was dismissed, and slowly crossed the hall to go upstairs.

Lumb appeared at the foot of the stairs. He seemed always appearing now, so Sara thought with a ray of comfort. He made her feel less lonely.

'Can I fetch anything for you, ma'am?'

Lumb was certainly a good angel. He looked so sympathetically at her, and now there was no one else who seemed to care, for Harriet had adopted her mistress' ideas that Sara only required to rouse herself in order to be quite well.

'Oh, Lumb, it's very silly, but may I just lean on you?'

Lumb was by her side in a moment.

'If you don't mind, Miss Sara, take my arm. My Lizzie when she was ill said that I was a better nurse than her own mother.'

Sara did not mind at all. She felt able, with Lumb's help, to get upstairs.

Once more she returned to the sofa in

the sitting-room. Lumb made up the fire, and then looked round to see that all was right. He was hoping to see the box of powders there, but no box was visible. There was yet time to find them, for Miss Sara only took them at breakfast and luncheon.

'Thank you, Lumb,' said Sara, opening her eyes, 'thank you very much. I don't want anything else. Don't send Harriet to me. I don't want her till the usual time.'

'No, miss, but I'll look in and see about the fire. I can walk very softly, and I shan't disturb you.'

'Yes, that will be a great comfort, and then I need not ring. Thank you, Lumb.'

She closed her eyes, and Lumb walked softly away, thinking,

'How thin she has got! she is only skin

and bones, and just the colour of a ghost.'

The next day Sara got up late, but appeared at luncheon. Then, without telling her mother, she went to bed, feeling too ill to do anything else. Harriet always dressed her mistress for dinner before she went to help Sara. It was part of Mrs. Beddoes' character that she never slurred over any details of her toilet when she was alone with Sara, any more than when there were visitors in the house. Indeed, in the old days at Willington, she had dressed every evening for her humble little dinner with as much care as she did now, when money was plentiful. This evening she put on a very pretty evening tea-gown of grey silk. Since her engagement she had given up her deep mourning, but she did not yet venture on any other colour but grey, a soft pearly grey trimmed with beautiful falling lace about it, and she always put

on a rose or some greenhouse flower before coming downstairs. This evening Harriet had placed ready for her to wear a white camellia. Mrs. Beddoes took special pains to fasten it in exactly at the right place on her bosom. She went downstairs early, and whilst waiting for Sara's appearance she stood by the bright fire and placed first one foot and then the other on the fender, for it was chilly. This was for her a very unusual action, for she possessed more than most women a great repose in her movements which had a very resting effect to any onlooker who was with her. Restlessness always denotes incapacity for continued thought or continuous aims. Mrs. Beddoes had often reproved Sara for her useless waste of energy, as restlessness really annoyed her.

Now she looked at herself in a long

mirror, and smiled. She forgot the present, and fancied herself at Stacey Hall, waiting there in the large drawing-room ; then she saw the door open, and she saw Lord Stretton come up to her and utter soft words of admiration. She heard his compliments and his endearing names, then in her vision she saw other guests arrive. She noticed the gentlemen eagerly giving her that unconscious flattery always bestowed by men upon pretty and well-dressed women. The scene pleased her immensely, it was pure delight, for the vision included neither Percival nor Clara, and certainly not her own daughter. They were blotted out of this canvas, and even scarcely remembered.

'The room wants a great deal of alteration before it looks really as it should ; Douglas has certainly no taste, he never had. But the pictures and the old oak make

up for a good deal of ugly furniture.' This was also a visionary speech in a visionary room.

The second gong rang, and in a few moments Lumb opened the door.

'Miss Beddoes has sent down word, ma'am, that she is too unwell to dine.'

'Then she must have some dinner sent up to her.'

Mrs. Beddoes passed on to the dining-room, and very soon she was eating her solitary meal with as much composure and etiquette as if there were several guests present.

When dinner was over, Lucy Beddoes went back to the drawing-room and rang the bell. Lumb appeared.

'Lumb, take up the sherry to Miss Sara's sitting-room and make up the fire there.

Lumb's manners were always as irre-

proachable as his answers were laconic. His quick departure was the signal for the widow to sit down by the fire. She took a letter from her pocket and read it carefully, bending a little over the fire so that the flame came on the paper.

It was the letter she had yesterday found awaiting her from Lord Stretton. It was in answer to one from her in which she had upbraided him for wishing to put off their marriage, and it was full of penitence and loving vows. She read the letter twice over, asking herself if the sentiments were false or sincere. She always expected insincerity in others, and was therefore prepared for it.

'Percival has him under his control,' she thought. 'Two months ago my letter would have brought him back here at once, now he does not suggest returning. This delay *must* end. Suppose after all

that he should—that he should change his mind?'

She pressed her lips tightly together and her eyes looked cold and hard. She hated Percival. She would have liked to crush him with her cold hatred. He stood in her way, that was his fault, and this was a great crime in her eyes. To think that through him—and Sara—she should once more lose what she had gained was simply maddening, the very idea made her desperate. Even with these thoughts filling her mind she did not move, but sat quite still, whilst one black image after another passed before her mental vision in hideous nakedness. And yet Lucy Bed- does knew the art of loving better than most women. Once it had been real, now it was merely the empty echo of a past power, and yet the echo was a wonderful counterfeit. It was able to take in those

who loved her, they would have sworn that it was the real thing.

Suddenly she collected her thoughts, which had strayed so far away, and rose from her chair.

'Lumb must long ago have taken up the wine,' she thought; and she walked upstairs.

She still felt in a dream as she entered the sitting-room where she found that the fire had been made up and now burnt cheerfully. There was a reading-lamp lighted and placed on the table. The sofa looked disordered, otherwise nothing seemed to be out of place. Near the lamp stood a tray on which was placed a bottle of sherry, a wine-glass, and some biscuits. Mrs. Beddoes looked round and noticed all these things, then she opened the door which separated the

two rooms, thinking, 'Lumb is an admirable servant.'

Sara was in bed, and Harriet had put the room tidy and had left it for the night. The curtains were drawn. The fire burnt dully, and a night-light was placed in a small china basin. Mrs. Beddoes had expected to find Harriet there, then, however, she recollected that it was the servants' supper-time, and that her maid would not willingly have stayed away, or perhaps it was that Sara had sent her away. Mrs. Beddoes approached the bed and spoke.

'So you could not come down, Sara?'

Sara heard her mother's voice and opened her eyes.

'No, I couldn't, mother.'

'Or you wouldn't, I suppose. But if you are really ill I shall sit up with you.'

'Oh, no, no, please don't—I want nothing.'

'You cannot be left alone if you insist on eating nothing. I must write for another doctor to-morrow.'

Sara did not answer, but turned her head away.

Mrs. Beddoes walked away by the door leading into the passage. She went to her own room, took off her pretty dress and put on a comfortable dressing-gown made of pale blue material and trimmed with white lace. Then she returned softly into the sitting-room. She now held the box of powders in her hand, and, pouring out half a glass of sherry, she very slowly mixed in two of the powders. Then she returned to Sara's bedside.

'Sara, rouse yourself. You had no wine for dinner.'

Sara tried to sit up, but she could not. She was either too drowsy or too weak to do so.

'Come, won't you drink this?'

'Give it to me,' said Sara, holding out her hand; but after holding it a second she returned it.

'Pour it down my throat, mother; then I need not get up, I am very sleepy.'

Mrs. Beddoes hesitated one instant, then she held Sara's head on her arm and placed the wine-glass to her lips.

CHAPTER VII.

HOURS OF DARKNESS.

The rectory appeared to be sunk in sleep. There was a stillness of night in all the dwelling-rooms down-stairs, and a chill air of desolation invaded the hall. A cold moon pierced the wintry fog and faintly illuminated the dark corners. Any listener might have heard the mice racing eagerly behind the wainscot or gnawing perseveringly at some hidden dainty. There is no such thing as silence in a house, for when human beings are asleep then other things

have sway, and mysterious silence makes itself known by mysterious sound. At the rectory, on this special night, however, all the human beings were not sunk in sleep, nor were they learning strange knowledge from dreams. In Sara's sitting-room the fire burnt brightly, and Mrs. Beddoes was lying on the sofa reading attentively a book in dark binding. Sara was asleep, but the door leading to her room was ajar, and the least noise there could be heard by the widow. When the clock struck two, she closed the volume and replaced it on a low shelf behind the door. She walked very softly, as if some one would hear her did she make a noise. Her face was pale and weary-looking, for she depended much on sleep, needing it to make up for daily loss of nervous force. Presently she paced the room a little, for she felt drowsy and she did not want to

fall asleep. By and by she would wake Sara, or, perhaps, she would wake of her own accord. As she walked, Lucy Beddoes reviewed the past. She did not wish to do this, but it seemed forced upon her by some irresistible power beyond her own control. In respect to all her actions she bestowed upon herself much self-pity, and she framed an apology for all that her conscience, however feebly, found fault with. Step by step she reviewed her misfortunes and blamed some unseen fate for them. Lucy had grown to be a materialist, because she had honesty enough to find all faith impossible with her own line of action. Faith in Christianity means faith in self-sacrifice, the foundation of this belief, and Lucy had always mentally rejected self-sacrifice. She had never given in her adhesion to the sentence that she must suffer, and she had bent her whole powers

in minimizing her suffering by forcing nature to be her servant and not her master.

Lucy would never have hurt a fly if it had not come in her path; indeed, she had a tenderness for the suffering of others if they did not in any way add to her own; but if they did, then pity had no part in her conduct. The principle of suffering for others found no acceptance with her. Why should she suffer, if she could by taking trouble crush out her pain? This world was all that was certain, and this world's goods did not fall into the mouths of most people without their making a decided effort to obtain them. Once she had believed in love, in happiness, in good-nature—her best creed had not gone much further—but this belief had been crushed by her lover's desertion. Then she had turned like a

wounded animal, possessed of but one certain instinct, that of rending all that impeded her path. To make the most of this world it was necessary to crush those who, if let alone, would crush her. Why not? Why should people believe anything so foolish as that one's own suffering did any good to others? Why not let them take their turn and suffer for us? It is the logical conclusion of those who reject the creed of self-sacrifice, for all other doctrine of the programme of the materialist is irrational, and is but the useless gilding of a bitter truth.

In a universe where all is struggle for supremacy, and victory only for the strongest, where is the sense of voluntarily giving up a good place to a weaker brother if after all only the strongest can grasp happiness? It was by many such infinitesimal steps that Lucy had reached this

point, but each step had made her feel more secure in her belief. Nature had given her a very attractive personality, and a strong attractive power. These were her weapons of defence, why was she not to use them? Then nature had also endowed her with a tenacious power of sticking to one idea. In a dim way the wisdom of ages has ever promised success to the best equipped, that is to the fittest, and it has never defined how much such fitness can bend the circumstances of life to the will of its possessor. 'Where there's a will there's a way,' says the old wisdom, but the reason of this precept is not evident, unless the belief has become general that the ordinary laws can be influenced by will. Lucy Beddoes had never relaxed her will, and the way had come to her—but what way? To Lucy this way had centred round two persons

who had crossed her path. Her own child, and the lover of her child. The first prevented her enjoying her happiness to the full, and the second might prevent her enjoying her happiness altogether. She loved neither of them, and jealousy of her child's good fortune had added new pain to her dislike. Sara was the child of the man she had disliked and despised. In past times she had herself wondered why the maternal instinct, so often spoken of in books, had not come to her. Then she settled that it had no right to come, and she prided herself on being logical. The materialist must trace maternal love from some inherited source, but in the search there will be many exceptions to account for.

The old-fashioned clock on the stairs boomed the half hour—half-past two. These last few weeks what had she been

doing? The question faced her in all its plain nakedness.

'At first it was a mistake,' she answered, 'and then I saw that it made her more languid. I am not *sure*, even now, if the effect is bad. She fell into this state without my help. It was brought on by a girl's foolish, hysterical fancies. I have known girls die of a love affair. Lottie Carew died of suddenly hearing of her lover's desertion. It is not very, very uncommon. If it were all to come right, she might rally again to-morrow, and the pain she has had may come from a chill. This house is damp at the fall of the leaf. The doctor gave her this prescription. I have it by me to show to anyone who wishes to see it. When a girl takes to fainting, one never knows how much of it is simulated.'

Then another voice answered,

'You ought to send for a doctor now at once. What will people say?'

'Yes, of course. Sara has always come down to meals till to-day. I will write a note to the doctor at once.'

Lucy rose and went to the writing-table. There was a half-written letter lying on the blotting-book. It was in Sara's hand-writing, and her mother read it. It was addressed to Virginia, and after the first lines the writer had stopped and had laid it down. Lucy took another sheet, and wrote this note very deliberately:

'Mrs. Beddoes would be much obliged to Dr. Scott if he would call and see Miss Beddoes to-morrow. She is taking a tonic ordered by Dr. Douglas, but she seems rather drowsy and unwell.'

She addressed it, and held the envelope in her hand for a moment. She felt restless. Then she listened at the door of

the bed-room, but there was no sound to be heard.

'I'll go down and put it on the hall-table, and then it can go early to-morrow,' she thought. 'She seems certainly very unwell.'

She put on her fur cloak, and taking up the silver candlestick she opened the door, taking, however, no special precaution against making a noise. She walked down-stairs, and her long train made a soft noise down the steps. The hall felt chilly after sitting so long in the warm sitting-room, and she shivered a little. The light of the candle shed but a very feeble ray, and there was a damp earthy smell arising from the hall-floor, because it was built beneath the ground level. At the further end of the hall, and close by the door leading to the kitchen, was Lumb's door. As Lucy turned away, after placing her note

on the table, she stumbled against a tall, wooden stool, which fell with considerable noise upon the marble floor. Lucy paused, and wondered if Lumb had heard her. If so, she had better see him. As she had expected, in a very few moments Lumb appeared, and the two confronted one another.

'Lumb, is that you? I thought that you would hear the noise. I upset this stool. Miss Sara seems poorly, so I have written for the doctor. The boy can take the note early to-morrow.'

'Yes, ma'am,' said Lumb, showing no sign of astonishment.

He was in his shirt-sleeves, but otherwise fully dressed, a fact which strangely enough escaped Lucy's notice before she quietly glided up-stairs.

Lumb had his candle in his hand, and when his mistress's light disappeared, he

went to the hall-table and looked at the note. He was a little surprised, and pondered some time over it.

'She's been a long time seeing that Miss Sara is ill,' he said, meditatively. 'In that case poor Miss Sara must be very ill.'

A very troubled expression came over his countenance as he stood waiting silently in the hall for fully ten minutes. What should he do? Should he go with the note to the doctor at once? Mrs. Beddoes would not like that. Why had she written it at all? Presently he himself walked up-stairs, very softly and very deliberately. His face showed that his mind was in an unusual state of excitement. He did not know which way to turn or what to do for the best. He had only taken off his coat so as to be ready for any emergency that might arise, though what it might be he had no idea.

'If only Mr. Cobbin were here, I should say to him, "You're her guardian, take her straight away." He would have the right.'

When he reached the landing, he at once noticed two things. In the first place, Mrs. Beddoes had left the sitting-room door very slightly ajar; and in the second, the room was nearly dark, so that the fire must have burnt low. This would be a good excuse for him to go in. He pushed the door a little, and coughing, so as to announce his arrival, he entered the room and found it empty, but the door into the bed-room was also not quite shut. In an instant Mrs. Beddoes stood in the second door-way. Her eyes were stern and her lips were pressed close together before she said,

'What do you want, Lumb?'

Lumb's face, however, dispelled all

suspicion. It was utterly expressionless.

'I thought, ma'am, that if you were anxious about Miss Sara I would take the note now, so I came up to ask you.'

'No, oh no, she is asleep now. We must not wake her. Sleep is the best medicine.'

'Shall I call Miss Smith, ma'am?'

'No, thank you. The fire is low here, put some more coal on, Lumb.'

Lumb put on coals with the noiseless perfection of a trained nurse. Lucy watched him from the doorway. She looked very pale and very ill herself when Lumb again turned round.

'I could stay here if you like, ma'am, to be ready for orders.'

'No, no, don't trouble yourself. I can ring, besides I shall go and sleep on the sofa in there. The sofa is big and very comfortable.'

Lumb made no comment.

'I'll fetch some more coal, ma'am,' he said, seized with this inspiration. 'I can do it without disturbing you.'

'Oh yes, of course, I shall go to sleep. There is nothing to do. If you send the note at eight o'clock that will be time enough.'

The clock struck three.

Lumb slowly lifted the coal-scuttle, and Mrs. Beddoes, appearing to have said all that was necessary, walked back to the sick room and shut the door behind her.

Instead of going down immediately Lumb waited and listened. Then he looked round again. His eyes had already noted that the box of powders was still there. It was near the tray close by the decanter of sherry. Putting down the coal-scuttle on the thick rug, Lumb went to the table and examined the glass and the

sherry. He had noted how much he had brought up. There were the dregs of sherry in the glass, and at the bottom a very minute sediment was visible. The sherry had evidently contained one or more of the powders. Next, keeping an eye on the door, he opened the box and took out a paper. There were a good many in the box. The small neatly-folded papers had to be pressed down in order to shut the card-board box. Lumb unfolded a paper, and he saw that it contained a small amount of very fine, white powder. He re-folded it and put it in his pocket, then taking the scuttle he went noiselessly away.

Five minutes later he returned carrying the coals, but when he had replaced the scuttle he once more paused and listened. There was no noise to be heard, then he saw that there was an old-fashioned wooden

bolt on the side of the door. With deft fingers Lumb silently turned it. This done he breathed more freely, and sat down by the table. He had brought a white duster with him; this he spread out before him, and, taking the top-most powder packet, he put the contents into the fire. The flames flashed up, strange coloured flames, and Lumb did not repeat this action, fearing the bright light; instead he took a little ornamental cup standing close by, and poured out the contents of each packet in succession as quickly as he unfolded it. Then he refilled the paper with very fine powdered sugar, putting in, as near as he could, the same quantity as before.

'Anyhow, it won't do any harm, if it don't do no good,' he said, smiling in spite of himself.

When he had thus changed six packets,

for the process required great care, he fancied he heard a sound in the next room. His face flushed with anxiety, and he rose very quickly to undo the bolt. He had better be found there, than that Mrs. Beddoes should discover that the door was bolted. He had, unfortunately, only done six, but six was something. After counting them, he next replaced all the powders, putting the six he had changed at the top. Then he wiped the glass quite clean so that not even the dregs should be left, and lastly he very quietly went away, carrying the cloth and the remains of the sugar with him.

He hardly dared believe that he had done this thing, and once downstairs he sat on the side of his tressel-bed, thinking and thinking. How he longed for daylight and for the doctor's presence, but no wishing could make the slow hours go

more swiftly. Time and death alone are inexorable, neither can be cheated or chased away.

Upstairs Lucy had done as she had said, and after she had shut the door on Lumb, she laid herself down on the sofa; not to sleep, however, but to think. She did not like her resting-place. From it she could see the white curtain of Sara's bed, and though it hid her daughter's face, the motionless figure made her feel restless and uneasy. The hours passed slowly, four, five, six struck, and there was no change, but just after this time night seemed to prepare for departure. The stillness of nature was broken by an early cock-crow, the candle guttered down to its socket, the fire burnt low, and Sara began to toss restlessly from side to side. Lucy rose from the sofa and stood still, almost holding her breath. A sudden

feeling seized her, a feeling of wishing to finish with it all, one way or the other. She felt unhinged, and as if some power stronger than herself were forcing her to move forward. She walked very quietly towards the bed, but the candle she had just lighted did not fully illumine Sara's face. Lucy walked impatiently away, and went to the door. Her fingers closed over the handle, and then she paused and listened. There was no sound. Again she paused, and far away there came another cock-crow. Mrs. Beddoes walked away from the door, and stood by the window. She softly drew back the curtain, and opened a part of the shutter. Outside it was dark, though a greyish, tinted light was penetrating the night. She could see no outlook towards the hills, so she put back the shutter and walked again towards the door. As she grasped

the handle, she turned it and looked in. The lamp was still alight and the fire burnt brightly. Lumb must have made it up again since two o'clock, she thought. He might soon be coming back, but she did not pause to think much. Her brain felt like a fast turning wheel that must go round and round till the whole machinery is stopped by the shutting off steam. Had it not been for this, she must have noticed how clean the glass was. She poured out half a glass of sherry, and then her long supple fingers grasped the box. She took out a powder, unfolded the paper, and poured the contents into the amber liquid. Then she threw the paper into the fire, and took out another. Again she poured out the contents and again she burnt the paper, and then she paused.

'A third one?' she said, as if questioning herself. 'It must end, it must.'

Her right hand was stretched out towards the box, and a third time she emptied the contents, and once more she burnt the paper before walking into the next room.

'Sara,' she called out, bending towards the girl, who looked more dead than alive, 'Sara, are you asleep?'

'Yes,' was the answer, in a weak, stupid voice. 'I have never slept. It is so red, so red.'

'Yes, you have, you have slept all night. Take this.'

There was no response, and she held the glass to Sara's lips and poured the contents down her throat.

'How odd it is! so, so sweet—' then she turned away.

Lucy did not wait to listen. She hurried away to the sitting-room, and pulled the bell violently. In a very short time Lumb appeared.

'Go and knock at Harriet's door, and tell her to come and sit with Miss Sara. I am very tired.' Mrs. Beddoes walked past him and went to her own room, and Lumb went to do her bidding. Three minutes later he returned, and entered the sitting-room. He looked at the glass, smiled as he saw the sediment, and then counted the powders.

'Three,' he said, 'three have gone; enough to kill her if——'

Again Lumb smiled in spite of himself, then he retired to call up the boy, but as he hurried off his mind was full of black thoughts.

CHAPTER VIII.

AT DEATH'S DOOR.

HARRIET came down to Lumb just before the boy was ready to start.

'Mistress says, Mr. Lumb, that she is to be called directly the doctor comes.'

'Go as quick as you can, Tom,' said Lumb, giving him the note, 'and mind, no loitering.'

Tom disappeared as if he had been shot out of a pea-shooter. He trembled before 'Mr. Lumb,' though he never could explain the reason of his fears.

Then Lumb turned to the maid.

'How is Miss Sara?'

'I'm sure she's very ill, or else she's got herself into dead hysterics.'

'Dead hysterics?' Lumb asked, wishing for information on the subject.

'Yes, Mr. Lumb. I've had them, so I know all about 'em.'

'But she's very ill?'

'Well, being in love has very queer effects on young ladies. It's love-pinings that's the matter with her.'

'Is it?'

'The medicine doesn't seem to have done her any good, and I think, Mr. Lumb, that it's a dose of the lover she wants,' said Harriet.

'Nonsense!' said Lumb.

'Mistress is quite done up looking after her, and I'm sure I'm dead-beat too.'

'Hadn't you better go back?' suggested

Lumb, taking no notice of Harriet's feelings.

'People have feelings. I'm not a trained nurse, and it's a cup of tea that I must have.'

'I'll bring it up to you myself, if you'll go back to your patient.' Lumb's duties never included waiting on Harriet, so the latter was now much flattered by his offer.

'It's very kind of you, Mr Lumb, I'm sure. Well, I'd better go. Don't forget about mistress wanting to be called when the doctor comes.'

Harriet disappeared, and Lumb went to get a tray and some tea from the housekeeper's room. The whole household to-day seemed to know that Miss Sara was very ill, though before this all had taken their cue from Harriet, and called the illness 'just fits of lowness and hysterics.' The

cook was making the servants' breakfast.

'Poor Miss Sara! Harriet says it's all along of a young man. I don't think there's a man anywhere worth getting ill over, and that's my honest opinion.'

'Nor a woman neither,' said Lumb. 'But I wish that Mrs. Gwillian would come up and nurse our young lady.'

'Mistress wouldn't like interference,' said Cook. 'Are you taking up Harriet's tea, Mr. Lumb? Well, I never! You're getting tender-hearted at last.'

'So I am,' said Lumb, with a grim smile, as he went off with Harriet's tea. His tender heart was somewhat hypocritical this morning, for in truth he 'couldn't abide' Harriet; but he wanted to keep her in the sick-room. The three powders at the top of the packet weighed on his mind, besides much else connected with the exchange he had made. He went

through the sitting-room, and knocked at the bed-room door. Harriet opened it at once.

'Well, is there any change?' he asked.

'I think she's taken for death,' said Harriet, looking scared. 'She looks that strange, I don't like it. I'm quite afraid to be with her alone.'

'I'll stay in this sitting-room till the doctor comes, in case you want anything, Miss Harriet.'

'Well, that is thoughtful of you, Mr. Lumb. There's some books to amuse you.'

'Thank you. I'll amuse myself.'

Harriet retired, and Lumb was left alone, but the door remained just a little ajar. Lumb noticed a chair placed by the table on which the wine-glass was standing, so he sat down on it and looked deliberately round.

The box was still there. There was no

attempt at concealment, and Lumb began asking himself if he were not an uncommonly suspicious fool. He looked all round the room, and then suddenly what Harriet had said about books caused his eyes to glance over the shelves. Thus glancing, he noticed a big book not placed even with the rest, and Lumb's eye for neatness was thereby offended. Mechanically he rose, and knelt down to put it even with the rest. He was just pushing it back, when he noticed something white lying near it. He picked it up. It was the petal of a white camellia.

'She wore that last night,' thought Lumb, and he pulled out the book and opened it. It was 'The History of Poisons.' Lumb hastily replaced it as if the volume burnt his hand, and then he returned to his chair. He felt restless, hardly liking to leave the room as he was anxious to

keep that box in sight, but the sound of the door-bell made him hurry down. It was Dr. Douglas' substitute. He was tall, young, and looked full of importance.

'I have had a note from Mrs. Beddoes. Is she at home?'

'It's Miss Beddoes that is ill, sir; will you come up?'

The doctor took off his great-coat, for it was a chilly, damp morning, and then he followed Lumb upstairs.

'I'll call my mistress,' he said, as he showed him into the sitting-room.

Mrs. Beddoes came in a very few minutes. She was still in her pretty dressing-gown, but she looked pale and weary. She bowed and smiled sadly at the new doctor, who was secretly struck by her interesting face, though too professional to show any softness towards a woman.

'I am sorry to disturb you so early, but Miss Beddoes was very drowsy last night. I sat up part of the night. She has been very worried—unhappy, shall I say—about a personal matter, and for some time she has been very hysterical. Dr. Douglas gave her a tonic which, I believe, she has taken constantly, but I thought I had better send for you.'

She opened the door, and, with a look, she dismissed Harriet, who found herself face to face with Lumb.

'I'll wait for orders, Miss Harriet, do go and have your breakfast. You look quite done up.'

'Well, I am. I shall hear my bell;' and Harriet hurried downstairs, whilst Lumb again passed into the sitting-room and was guilty of listening. At first he heard nothing, but presently the young doctor remarked,

'This young lady is very ill. I ought to have been called in before.'

'I wish I had sent for you in spite of her, but my daughter would not hear of it. I ought not to have given in to her, but hysterical girls——'

'She had something on her mind, you say?'

'I am afraid so; an unhappy love affair.'

'Ah! I see. You opposed it?'

'For her good—yes—besides, the other side opposed it as well.'

'Will you let me see Dr. Douglas' prescription?'

'Certainly. It is in my room.'

Lumb stooped down and hastily seized the poker ready to attack the fire, but happily for him, Mrs. Beddoes went out by the other door, and presently he heard her re-enter.

'Ah, yes, I see.—Thank you.—You should have called me in sooner. I fear that your daughter is very ill indeed, very dangerously ill.'

Mrs. Beddoes made a faint answer, but Lumb could not hear any distinct words.

'When did she take the last dose of this?'

'I don't know. I was away in town for a day. It must have been in my absence.'

'Then I think I had better tell you plainly, Mrs. Beddoes, that your daughter has been slowly poisoning herself, and that, had it not been for the present turn in her illness, it must have proved fatal. One more over-dose—for I feel sure that is what has happened—and she would have——'

The perspiration broke out over Lumb's forehead. He trembled.

'One more dose! Good God!' he

thought. 'I saved her that time, but it may still be too late.'

He again listened attentively.

'One more,' murmured the widow, 'but she will recover?'

'I—I—can't say. Will you kindly ring for the maid, and I shall stay here. Pray go and rest, you look very ill yourself. I can do all that is necessary.'

Mrs. Beddoes rang the bell, and Lumb ran noiselessly downstairs.

The doctor stayed a long time, and through all the household a strange feeling of awe was communicated. Everyone said that Miss Sara, the tall, bright, affectionate girl was dying; Lumb alone asked no questions and made no remarks. The words 'one more dose' rang in his ears. Suppose another one should be given her, suppose that the person who gave them to her should not take the top-

most packets, then——Anyhow, as long as the doctor was there, there was hope, and *that* dreaded thing could not happen; but when he went?——Lumb began to entertain desperate thoughts. Should he speak to the doctor? No, how could he? Would he not be thought mad, and only get his instant dismissal? The young doctor did not seem to weigh his words. Then again, suppose the doctor took the box and found that the three first powders were merely sugar, what would he think? Lumb could bear the suspense no longer, he ran upstairs again and boldly entered the sitting-room. The partition door was now closed; the box still stood on the table just where he had last seen it. Lumb tremblingly opened it, and took out the three packets remaining which he had tampered with and threw them into the fire. In another moment the doctor came out, and

as usual Lumb had recourse to the coal-box.

'Ah!' said the doctor, 'pray make no noise. Quiet is absolutely necessary.'

'Is Miss Sara better, sir?'

'She is at death's door. That's all I can say, but no case is hopeless at her age.'

'There are the powders, sir, which Miss Sara took,' said Lumb, taking up the box. 'You might like——'

'Oh! I know exactly what they are. All right in themselves, but Miss Beddoes has been taking too many of them.'

'She might get hold of them again.'

The doctor smiled.

'She does not even know us;' but as Lumb almost thrust the box into his hand the young man took it and slipped it into his pocket.

'Don't disturb Mrs. Beddoes, I'll come again in an hour. This is a sad trouble

for her, but I should advise you to say nothing about it till we see how she is.'

'Yes, sir.'

Lumb ran down-stairs with alacrity to open the door. The doctor carried that box away with him, so now he could breathe freely, for the moment at least. Then he thought,

'Suppose she has some more!' and his agony of mind returned, but at that instant he could do no more. Wild ideas of getting in a trained nurse, who would let no one give the patient anything but what the doctor ordered, entered his head; but how was he to procure one? how could he go against his mistress? She would do what she liked, and he was only a servant.

In the meanwhile, Mrs. Beddoes, really exhausted after her night's watching, was lying on her bed. She could not sleep, even though the room was darkened. Her

eyes felt wide open, as if no power could ever close them again. In her ears rang the words, 'She is at death's door.' Would the door open and close behind Sara? She could not face the fact, she mentally turned away from it. She suspended further thought, except that like a jangle of bells the words rang through her brain, 'She is at death's door.' At last she felt that she was very tired, very tired of thinking. At any moment she might give way, but she must not. She had iron nerves. She was not a weak woman, she had never been weak, and she had always faced the end of all possibilities. This one she did not wish to face now, though she had often done so before. Every now and then the possibilities circling round the words, 'At death's door,' thrust themselves before her, but she deliberately put them aside. She wanted calmness, and

she must do nothing to destroy the capability of being calm. The doctor was in that room. She was not wanted. She was glad that she could lie quietly like this, but hardly had she settled this calming fact than she began to feel extremely restless. She could not lie still much longer, she must get up and listen. What was happening now? Perhaps at this moment the door of eternity might be opening to let in a human being. 'She is at death's door,' he had said decidedly. Mrs. Beddoes could not breathe freely. She felt oppressed, as if something were suffocating her. It was useless to lie down any more, so she settled that she had better get up and dress. She rose from her bed and drew up the blind. The fog was clearing, but it was a dark grey morning, such as seems full of sadness, however much one may try to force joy into it.

When she was dressed she felt more like herself, and she walked out of her room and went softly down the passage. At Sara's door she paused and listened. She had stood there but a few moments when there was a step on the stair, and Lumb stood beside her.

'Did you ring, ma'am? Can I bring you anything?'

'No, I did not ring. Has the doctor gone?'

'I think I hear him coming back,' said Lumb, glad enough that his words were true.

He fell back as the doctor approached, but he did not go out of hearing.

'How did you leave her?' said Mrs. Beddoes, calmly, though her voice was very low.

'The remedies have not been useless, that is all I can say at present. I ought to have been called in days ago.'

'She was so very decided against calling you in.'

'Of course, I quite see. In these cases it is always so, and you would be the last to understand. Excuse me, but I have telegraphed for a nurse.'

'Indeed, we can do all that is necessary.'

Mrs. Beddoes' manner at once became haughty.

The young doctor was too callous to care, he was a professional now.

'Your maid is not at all competent. I must have a trained nurse.'

'Of course. When will she get here?'

'By the six o'clock train.'

'Thanks—Lumb, are you there? Remember to send the carriage to the station to meet the six o'clock train.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'In the meantime, you must see that my

directions are strictly carried out,' said the doctor; then they passed into the sick-room together and Lumb was left outside. He would have liked to say,

'I nursed my Lizzie when she was at death's door, and if I might I'd do the same for Miss Sara till the trained nurse comes.'

But a butler cannot speak like this, and Lumb, in an agony of fear, went down-stairs to give the order for the carriage. It was only lunch-time, and all the after-noon *she* would be in the sick-room; what was to be done? If Harriet could be persuaded to stay there, and if he could give her a warning? It seemed impossible, however, for Harriet always took her cue from her mistress. Lumb felt inclined to go to the post-office and to telegraph to some one, but to whom? Mr. Osborne he knew was away, and Mr. Profitt was use-

less. There was no one. Mrs. Gwillian would not come. He could think of only one small thing. He would lock up the sherry so that none could be taken without his knowledge. Had he known the truth, Lumb might have been spared much anxiety.

Every hour Sara was to be made to take a spoonful of medicine, but it was difficult to get her to swallow it. When Harriet went down to her dinner, Mrs. Beddoes was once more left alone with her child. The doctor had promised to return in the afternoon, and to stay till the nurse arrived. This was the last time she should be alone with Sara, and as she sat near the window her mind lost, for the first time since the night, its dead feeling and thought again regained its sway. 'At death's door!' Would Sara enter that door, or would——The doctor did not seem

hopeful. What had she done? That medicine had been ordered. It had done Sara harm. That young man had said so, but he had concluded that the girl had over-dosed herself, and that she had done it because she was unhappy. This idea had not occurred to Lucy before. She clung to it now as a way out of all remorse, and she even began almost to fancy that it was true. Lucy remembered the first time that she had by accident given Sara two doses, and she recalled how it had seemed to do her harm, and then——She remembered how that other idea had so naturally grown out of it, or at least she now fancied that it had done so; for the mind has labyrinths, where even those who have made them, hopelessly lose themselves. But now the idea that had cost her so much to face and to hide from herself, appeared to be the most natural solution for

the world to get hold of. Sara had done this thing herself because of her unhappiness about Percival Osborne. All the world would find out the truth about Percival. Sara had been foolishly in love, and opposition had made her wilful, had in fact brought her to this result. For everybody's sake the matter would be as much hushed up as possible, and after all it was true that the cause lay entirely in the existence of Percival Osborne.

Suddenly there was a sound from the bed, and, turning quickly to look back, Mrs. Beddoes saw Sara sitting up with wild open eyes.

'Mother!'

Sara said the word distinctly, then fell back. It was as if a dead person had arisen and called her by name. Mrs. Beddoes had strong nerves and she was not superstitious, but at this moment an un-

reasoning fear took possession of her, a strong, helpless fear, and without waiting to look again she went hastily into the sitting-room and rang the bell violently. Harriet appeared.

'Harriet, I feel faint, and I am tired. You and Ellen must stay here till the nurse comes.' She said nothing about medicine, but added, 'If there is a change —for the worse—call me at once.'

'Yes, ma'am,' said Harriet, not overpleased to have again to sit in that sick-room. She saw her mistress turning away, and she had to obey.

As Mrs. Beddoes walked down the passage, she seemed still to hear the words, 'At death's door,' and 'Mother.'

CHAPTER IX.

LUMB RELIEVED.

Not long after, Harriet, like her mistress, experienced feelings of faintness. She had been some time with the doctor, and she wanted her early cup of tea. Ellen had done nothing, why should not she take her turn alone? So Ellen was fetched, and told that Mrs. Beddoes had said she was to sit in the sick-room till the new nurse came.

'I never can bear sick people,' said Ellen, 'and I've got all my work to do.'

'Well, bring your work, and you can sit by the window.'

'Is that all? Well, I suppose I can do that. What have I to do?'

'There's medicine every hour; but it's over the hour, so mistress must have given it. I'll come up before five and give it.'

'I'm sure I couldn't give it her. She do look taken for death.'

'She does,' said Harriet, 'and I shall be dead too if I don't rest a bit.'

With that she went downstairs, and the patient was once more left to the tender mercies of a frightened maid. Every now and then she moaned for water in a half-conscious manner, but Ellen was only frightened, and did not dream of approaching the bed. Downstairs Lumb was questioning Harriet, who, to ease her conscience, replied that Miss Sara was to be

kept very quiet, and that Ellen was seeing after her.

'Where's mistress?' asked Lumb.

'She's dead beat, she says, though it's not much that she's done. I was with the doctor all the time he was there. I dare-say now, Mr. Lumb, that you don't guess the real reason of the illness? It's tragic, quite.'

Lumb looked up without answering, a sure way he found of getting more information.

'Tragic, I say; the poor thing has poisoned herself, that's what the doctor thinks.'

'Poisoned herself. Oh, Lor'!' said the cook. 'Whatever for?'

'I can understand it, for I nearly did the same thing myself once,' said Harriet, sighing.

'Didn't it act?' asked the cook.

'I didn't take *quite* enough, but the reason was the same—a love reason.'

'Oh, dear!' said the cook. 'Mr. Lumb, that's what the ladies suffer for the sake of you men.'

'Mrs. Lumb never took poison as I know of,' said Lumb, decidedly.

'I meant man in general, Mr. Lumb; it's the tender heart of the female sex that you can't understand.'

'Not all the sex,' said Lumb, 'there's some hard ones among them.'

Harriet sighed deeply, and shook her head. Lumb soon got up, and refused any more tea.

'You do seem concerned about Miss Sara,' said the cook; 'but I'm sure she's took for death. I dreamt last night that I saw a hedgehog, and as sure as I dream of a hedgehog, one unrolling of himself that is, it means death. If not my own

friends and relations, at least some one in the house or connected with it.'

'I've no belief in dreams,' said Lumb, in a matter-of-fact voice.

'Some haven't,' said cook; 'but then some have. My cousin dreamt three nights running that her cat was killed, and so she took especial care of him the third day, and sure enough he was nearly drowned. It was a merciful warning,' continued the cook, 'and that convinced me.'

'Well, I'm sure she's dying. There's a death smell about the place,' said Harriet.

Lumb would hear no more. He slipped up the stairs to listen again at the sitting-room door. Soon he heard a moan—nothing else. Then he slipped out, and went to his mistress's door. Here he heard a soft pacing up and down, up and down. Like a guilty thief he went back to the sitting-room, for he had made up his mind,

and then opened the bed-room door and looked in.

'You haven't had your tea, Ellen? Are you sitting here?'

'Well, Mr. Lumb, I 'ave to. That moaning do make one all of a tremble. I always was nervous of sick people; but perhaps you had best not come in.'

Lumb had spied the medicine-bottle.

'She was to have that every hour. It came at two, and there's only one dose gone.'

'Miss Smith's coming to see to it.'

'I'm a very good nurse; I saved my Lizzie.'

Lumb entered now, and went to the bedside. He took the bottle, poured out a dose, and held it to Sara's lips. He was as tender as a woman, more tender than any woman in this melancholy house.

Even this drop seemed to revive the patient. Then she moaned again.

'It's water she wants. Here's some lemonade, and no one gives it to her.'

He poured out some in another glass, and gave it to his young mistress.

'She's taken for death,' said Ellen, repeating Harriet's words; 'nothing's no good.'

'Has mistress been in again?' said Lumb, softly.

'No, she's lying down faint, poor lady.'

'Come, Ellen, the poor thing won't kill you. Sit here and give her a drop whenever she moans for it. It's only Christian of you.'

Ellen obeyed in fear and trembling; but, encouraged by Lumb, she found a little courage.

'She's that white—I'm terrified.'

'It's very harassing, but it's duty,' said

Lumb, sternly; and then he slipped away, saying to himself,

'I must come in an hour, and see she has it again. They are all born fools, and think only of themselves. If my master was here now! He wouldn't have let the poor young thing suffer. They say she did it herself. Oh, Lord! Well, mum's the word, till I can do any good!'

He went back to his pantry still in perplexity, for he knew his mistress was not faint. If only the time would go on. This had been the longest day of his life, he thought. The next hour Lumb ran up, and again he peered in cautiously. This time he found Ellen fast asleep in the arm-chair just where she could not see the patient, and Ellen's sleep was of that sound kind which housemaids usually enjoy. Lumb did not wake her till he had poured out the medicine and had

given it to Sara; then he frightened Ellen with the remark that if Miss Sara died it would be her fault. But in truth Sara seemed to be a little more conscious, though happily not enough so to notice him. He was only grateful to Providence that Mrs. Beddoes had not yet come out of her room, otherwise his nursing powers would certainly not have been exhibited.

'When Lizzie was ill, mother and me never left her one minute,' he said to himself, putting on his hat to run to the station.

He meant to meet the nurse himself. It was dark now, the wind was blowing the great branches about, and there was a moaning sound from the wood. Lumb heard it, but to him it was 'a nasty noise as you only hear in the country;' for he had a true cockney's horror of Nature in her winter garments. Though he ran all

the way, he was only just in time to see the train puff up to the platform, where the porter and the station-master busied themselves leisurely by holding a conversation with the guard instead of attending to the passengers.

Lumb, without further help, soon espied the nurse, for she was dressed in uniform.

'Are you the nurse for the rectory?' he asked.

'For Mrs. Beddoes?'

'No, for Miss Beddoes. Come this way, please; the carriage is here, and most likely you'll find the doctor with the patient, if not, nurse, don't let anyone but yourself give the young lady anything. They are stupid women with us, and even mistress does not understand nursing. Don't wait for your box, I'll see to it.'

'Very well, of course I take entire charge.'

The nurse was professional in her tone, but Lumb felt reassured.

'Thank God that danger's over, if it's not too late,' he said, as he saw the carriage drive off.

At that instant a heavy hand was placed upon his shoulder.

'I'm beggared! It's Lumb himself! How do, Lumb? So glad to see you. Are the ladies well? and Miss Sara, is she bonnie?'

'Good Lord!' said Lumb, 'it's Mr. Cobbin himself.'

'Well, I'm not a ghost yet. Eh! but is anything the matter?'

'The matter! Well, I should think so. Miss Sara's at death's door.'

Cobbin turned pale.

'Not my Miss Sara! I'm beggared! Got a London doctor? No! Wait a minute. Down here it's so sleepy. Come along with me. Lumb, you know everything; who's

the crack man in town? Have him down at once. We can telegraph from here.'

'Sir Charles Trevor, sir. That's who the tip-top gentry have; but his fee, they say, is——'

'Hang his fee! Just you wire— "Come at once. Fee secured," or whatever'll bring him.'

Lumb felt more agitated at this moment than he had ever done in all his life before. For once in his life he was taken by surprise.

They telegraphed to Sir Charles Trevor, and Lumb and Mr. Cobbin thought themselves very clever when they had worded this message:

'*Urgently wanted at Chapel Stacey Rectory. Come at once. Usual fee or double no objection. Reply.*'

Happily Lumb knew the address.

'Now,' said Cobbin, 'shall we wait for reply or go on at once?'

'If you don't mind, sir, we'll wait. The trained nurse has gone up, and that young doctor will meet her. It's all we can do at present, but I want a few private words with you.'

'All right, Lumb. Come into the waiting-room. I hope there's a fire, for the old country is uncommonly chilly.'

'It's a poor place for you, sir, but we can be alone; though, perhaps, sir, you'll be wanting dinner.'

'Dinner, Lumb! No, I've dined that sumptuous on board I'm quite sick of those spreads. A cup of tea would please me best, but I'd rather hear all your news. I never went to London, but came straight here from Southampton. Profitt'll want to talk so much, and I wanted to see Miss Sara. I've thought of her all the way home, bless her!'

'You never got my letter, sir?'

'No, but I was overtaken by an unsigned telegram, and that's why I came straight ahead. Why couldn't you consult Profitt? he'd have given you the best advice without waiting for me. It wasn't the tin, was it, Lumb? Why in the name of goodness didn't you think of it sooner? Money would have been found somehow, even if I'd been beggared.'

Lumb looked round the poor little waiting-room, and carefully saw that the door was shut. Then he examined his master, Cobbin, wrapped up in a great fur coat, looking the picture of health, but there were some new lines of care on his honest face.

'I can't tell you, sir, how glad I am to see you.'

'Now, Lumb, what is it? First, though, I'll just thank you straight out for your

honest service. You've done your duties by the ladies, I'm sure, except about this Trevor.'

'I don't know if I have, sir, and that's the truth. I've tried, but—I was in a queer fix this week, and it's best not to beat about the bush. Miss Sara is dying of slow poison.'

Cobbin started from his chair.

'Are you out of your mind, my good fellow? Slow poison, I'm beggared.'

'Well, sir, I ought to be, but—I'm not.'

'Sit down, and speak straight ahead. It was plain sailing with you once, Lumb, but now you're wrapping everything up in mystery, and I'm a plain man.'

Lumb 'went ahead,' and Cobbin, as he sat warming his feet by the station fire, listened with unmixed surprise. When Lumb's story was ended, Cobbin's only

remark was, 'Well, I'm beggared!' At that moment the door opened, and the answer to the telegram was handed in.

'*Will come by mail train.—Trevor.*'

'What's to be done now, Lumb?' asked Cobbin, looking quite haggard. 'Suppose—'

'We'd better not suppose anything, sir. My advice is take Miss Sara away as soon as possible.'

'And face *her*? I'd rather face a miners' strike. Well, I'm beggared!'

'The doctor'll help you, sir. Change of air is a very convenient excuse with the gentry. It's the money and the man *she* wants.'

'The money, Lumb! Well, if that would stop it—but as for that fine lord! he's welcome to have her. I'll run over and see him myself as soon as I can. Well, now, let's come. I suppose the carriage will meet that swell doctor. It's a

comfort, Lumb, that you know all their ways. All the same I enjoyed myself uncommonly going about with Miss Sara, but lor', Lumb, the things I had to examine when she was with her young man! I know the Tower by heart. No, I'll face the mother for her sake, Lumb. I don't know what I can do for you! Money seems a poor kind o' thanks for all you've done, but you can have it. Bless me, I very nearly lost it all, though. Profitt knew it, but he kept mum. The land was claimed by another chap, and I thought poor Farrer was going to be unlucky after all, but we fought it out, and Miss Sara's fortune's safe enough now, and the mine's all right.'

'The money nearly cost her dear—even now, sir, I don't know what to say! She's at death's door. The doctor said so. I heard him, but I hope never to pass such

another day in all my life as I've done to-day.'

The two walked down the dark road leading to the rectory. When they reached the hotel Mr. Cobbin told Lumb to go and take a room for him, with a message that he would come in later.

'I'll be beggared, but I'll not sleep under *her* roof,' he muttered, under his breath.

'Come in the back way, sir, if you don't mind. It's shorter, and besides we shall hear sooner how she is, and not be seen either.'

Cobbin followed Lumb, who, opening the small door into the hall, let his master into the house. There was a silence everywhere. The hall-lamp was lighted, but no other sign of life was visible. Lumb paused, and leaving Mr. Cobbin in the study he went into the kitchen. Cook was preparing Mrs. Beddoes' dinner.

'Well, cook, have you heard how Miss Sara is? The nurse has come.'

'She can't live through the night, nurse says,' answered cook, her voice sinking into a sad whisper.

Lumb walked out again, and rejoined his master.

'She's still very ill, sir. Will you come up into the sitting-room? The doctor will most likely see you, if I tell him you're Miss Sara's guardian.'

The two men walked softly upstairs, Lumb going first. He seemed quite to consider himself as master now that Mr. Cobbin had come back.

In the sitting-room everything was as it had been when Lumb left it. Evidently Mrs. Beddoes had not returned. At that moment the doctor himself entered the room.

'Can I see Mrs. Beddoes?' he said, not

noticing Mr. Cobbin. 'Her daughter is most dangerously ill. I fear that there is a turn for the worse.'

'I'm Miss Sara's guardian, sir,' said Mr. Cobbin, coming forward. 'There's London advice coming by the mail, and till then nobody sees my ward.'

'But her mother, sir——'

'Her mother be hanged! You've got a nurse. I'm master here, and I say that no one shall go near her.'

The young man thought he had got hold of a lunatic, but Lumb's immovable face surprised him, for that seemed to say that it was all right.

'Mr. Cobbin is master here, sir,' repeated Lumb.

'Pray may I ask who is coming? I do not wish to meet——'

'What, not Sir Charles Trevor?' said Cobbin.

'Oh, in that case—but his fee is——'

'You mind your business, young man. You can ask the fee you like, but Miss Sara's not to be left. Hadn't you better also have another nurse?'

'We must wait for Sir Charles Trevor's opinion. At present the one I have is enough.'

'I'll stay here, and you go to her. Now, Lumb, you had best go and wait on your mistress.'

Cobbin gave his orders in a rough-and-ready sort of way. The two had on the way up made their plans. Nothing was to be said, but on no excuse whatsoever was Mrs. Beddoes to be allowed to come into the sick-room.

'I think Mrs. Beddoes should be told,' remonstrated the doctor.

'Look here, young man, my orders are this. You lock that outside door, and I'll

be on this side. Mrs. Beddoes nor Mrs. anyone else don't go into the sick-room. I shall say it's your orders, and if you don't tell the same tale so much the worse for you.'

'If Miss Beddoes dies, her mother will——'

'Hang for it,' said Cobbin, almost forcing back the young doctor into the sick-room, and this latter returned to think over what legal action he could take against this madman, but being really interested in the case, he soon forgot his anger; moreover, he was beside himself with joy at the idea of having a consultation with the best, or rather the most famous London doctor. He foresaw that his own fortune would in consequence be much advanced.

'The doctor and the nurse won't let anyone come in,' said Lumb, when he

knocked at the door of his mistress's bedroom to announce that her dinner was ready.

Mrs. Beddoes looked very pale and wearied when she came down, but she had dressed herself becomingly for dinner.

'Indeed! Then I will wait till later.'

When she was seated at the dinner-table, Lumb gave her the next piece of news.

'Mr. Cobbin has just arrived, ma'am; he's taken a room at the hotel.'

Mrs. Beddoes flushed in spite of herself.

'Mr. Cobbin has just arrived!'

'He hopes to see you to-morrow, ma'am.'

'To-morrow?'

'Yes, ma'am. He is very sorry Miss

Sara is ill, and he has telegraphed for a London doctor.'

Mrs. Beddoes pressed her lips together, and rose suddenly. She went straight upstairs to Sara's bed-room, and turned the handle. The door was locked.

'Will you open the door, please? It is Mrs. Beddoes.'

The door was opened an inch wide by a tall, stern-looking nurse.

'No one must come in here. It is against the doctor's orders; that is, till Sir Charles Trevor comes.'

Then Lucy Beddoes walked down very quietly and finished her dinner without discovering that Mr. Cobbin was sitting in the next room.

CHAPTER X.

PLAIN SPEAKING.

Mr. Cobbin kept guard all that night in the sitting-room, his solitude being relieved by occasional visits from Lumb. Mrs. Beddoes also kept guard in the drawing-room below, waiting for the great doctor. Would the patient upstairs live till he came? She heard reports from Harriet that she was very ill, and that the doctor forbade anyone to go near the room. If anything was wanted, the nurse came down for it, for the doctor never left the

bedside. They had even locked the sitting-room door, Harriet reported, and only allowed Mr. Lumb to go in there with coals. These were Harriet's reports to her mistress. Mrs. Beddoes was strangely restless as the time wore on, and she waited for a ring of the bell. Lumb looked in now and then to make up the fire, but nothing was to be got out of him, for he volunteered no remark and she asked him no questions. Now and then Mrs. Beddoes gazed at herself in the glass, and noted how ill she looked. These last two days had taken a great deal out of her, and she must try earnestly to calm her nerves. Presently she went to rest on the sofa, wrapping a large, white Shetland shawl around her, and after a time she fell asleep, and was only roused by Lumb's sudden opening of the door, and announcing,

'Sir Charles Trevor.'

She was up in a moment, and immediately regained her self-possession as she held out her hand. Sir Charles was a man of the world, for it is not only medical skill that gains a title, and he answered,

'Your servant met me at the station. I am in time. Don't disturb yourself, I prefer going alone to meet your doctor, and at once.' Then, taking in the beauty of the woman before him, he added, 'I fear you have tired yourself waiting for me. If you will stay here, I will return shortly and tell you my opinion.'

'Thank you; the young doctor and the new nurse are jealous of interference.'

He just smiled, and was gone, and something in his manner made Mrs. Beddoes anxious. She said to herself,

'He has heard some report——'

Then she impatiently took a chair and sat by the fire. The night had seemed to her like a long, dreary eternity. The clock struck four, she shivered a little. Then she took Lord Stretton's last letter out of her pocket. It announced that he was coming to see her. He was going to take her by surprise, and, whilst Percival escorted Clara to Bournemouth, he would stay at Chapel Stacey Hotel.

'Would he come just as it was all over,' she thought, 'or——' How long the night was! She wished Sir Charles would come down-stairs again. How unfortunate that that horrid Cobbin had turned up. She could not see any reason for it, but to-day she experienced a feeling as if she were a hunted creature closely pursued by hunters. She almost wished that she had let everything take its own course. Lord Stretton was coming. He was still true,

still under her influence; why had she doubted him for a moment? She sat down and sighed, a weary sigh of a weary woman, and yet none of her great plans had yet failed. Very soon she would make him announce their approaching marriage to the world, and then——

She stretched out her arms and clasped her hands over her head. Would she ever grow sick and weary of that new life as she had grown weary of other things? Would the one object of her life, when attained, compensate her for the long waiting, the long struggle, the——? She turned her mind away from the next idea; after all, everything might fail. 'But no, it must not, it shall not,' she thought, as she started up hearing the slow tread of a man's step. Sir Charles was coming back. She felt that she could not go to meet him, for her tongue seemed suddenly

tied; she was speechless, and she felt as if she were rooted to the spot.

He came nearer and nearer, a slow, firm step, the step of a man who has faced many difficulties and has never shirked any of them, the step of a man who has often stood side by side with death, and has struggled with the all-powerful foe, saying, 'Not yet, wait longer.'

He knocked softly. In the stillness of the early morning the knock sounded to Lucy Beddoes like the knock of death itself; she felt that that ghastly head with its hollow eyes and its terrible skull was there, just behind the wooden door, and that it had come for her, for her. Her lips refused to say, 'Come in.' For the first time in her life she was spell-bound with fear. She did not speak, but the door opened slowly, so slowly and softly that she could have screamed out, 'Go

away!' but again she felt tongue-tied, she could not speak; and in another moment Sir Charles Trevor stood before her. She felt that she had no longer any power to struggle with fate, that she could no longer act any part but that of silence. Why had she been such a fool as to sit up and become so utterly spent in mind and body? The man, so full of power and decision, came close up to her. The lamplight was not dimmed nor was the fire burning low; she could see and be seen distinctly. She would have preferred darkness, but there was light, and this light showed her that the doctor's face was calm and stern, a face quite incapable of being swayed by her beauty, or by her words. Her great, magnetic influence—and she was aware of it—was now useless, for it had no effect upon him.

'You asked me to come and tell you

the latest news, Mrs. Beddoes, and I have come.'

Only then did Lucy find words and the power to speak them.

'Yes, tell me.'

'Your daughter,'—(to her it seemed as if he unduly emphasized the words)—'your daughter is very ill. I shall stay here till there is a turn—one way or the other.'

'It is very good of you,' stammered Lucy, speaking the first words that came to her, for she felt a strong hatred for this man.

'It is necessary,' he said, quietly.

'The doctor said so yesterday.'

'He formed some idea of the cause of this illness. Did he tell you?'

'Yes.' Mrs. Beddoes spoke very slowly and distinctly. 'He thinks that she has over-dosed herself. It is very likely. She

has been making herself unhappy over a love-affair.'

'Exactly so. I have formed another idea.'

Lucy stood quite firm and outwardly immovable, but her limbs shook beneath her. She forced herself to answer,

'Your presence ensures that all that skill can do will be done.'

'I am sending for another nurse, a woman whom I can trust implicitly to obey orders. Till she arrives I shall not leave Miss Beddoes.'

'If you say so, I am sure that it is necessary.'

'It is quite necessary. You will excuse me now.'

'Certainly. You are very kind.'

Lucy held out her hand. Sir Charles bowed as if he were unaware of her gracious action, and retired as slowly as he had come, with firm, decided steps.

Lucy stood a long time rooted to the spot; so long, indeed, that the clock struck again, and then, more dead than alive, she dragged herself upstairs and went to bed, but the sun was rising over the eastern hills before she fell into an uneasy slumber.

At a later hour, Mr. Cobbin went back to the hotel, and ordered a meal to be served to him.

'It's late for breakfast,' he said to the waiter, 'but get me something to refresh the inner man. Strong tea, you know; and, if a gentleman calls to see me, I want to talk with him in private, you understand, and he'll have his meal with me.'

Mr. Cobbin looked more cheerful than he had done for some hours; he even smiled at times, as if he were thinking of something that amused him. Presently the door opened, and the waiter announced,

'The gentleman is here, sir.'

To Jethro Cobbin's astonishment, a tall, handsome man walked in with the conscious air of being at home in the place.

'I was told you wished to see me, sir,' said the stranger. 'To whom have I the pleasure of speaking?'

'No, sir, you're not my man. It's a little mistake. Here, waiter! This isn't the gentleman I referred to; it's another one that will come from the rectory.'

'And I was going there, not coming from it,' replied the handsome man. 'I am Lord Stretton.'

'I'm beggared!' exclaimed Cobbin, arting up. 'Are you Lord Stretton? And I'm Cobbin—Jethro Cobbin. You must have heard the widow speak of me.'

Lord Stretton's face, for a moment, lost its good-humoured smile.

'Mrs. Beddoes has certainly referred to you, Mr. Cobbin.'

'Yes, that's me. She didn't refer quite pleasantly, did she? She never was partial to me, nor me to her.'

'Mrs. Beddoes has a few prejudices.'

Lord Stretton's smile returned.

'That's it, a few prejudices against me and—against her daughter!'

'I have only just arrived. Is anything the matter?'

The door again opened, and this time the right man entered. Sir Charles Trevor came forward; then, seeing Lord Stretton, he held out his hand, for they had met in London society.

'You here, Sir Charles! I hope Mrs. Beddoes is not ill?' he asked, suddenly alarmed.

'Not Mrs. Beddoes, but her daughter. She has been at death's door, but I am

glad to say, Mr. Cobbin, that I believe we shall pull her through.'

'I thought so,' said Cobbin, hardly able to contain his joy. 'I knew you could do it when I saw you. Sit down, Sir Charles, and have some tea, and you too, Lord Stretton, unless it's something stronger you would prefer. We have fasted too long. It was a tough business, but I never did despair. I knew that she would pull through. Where's Lumb?'

'I left him still on guard—but there is now no need. The other nurse will soon be here. I must go away by the two o'clock train.'

'I hardly understand,' said Lord Stretton. 'I have heard nothing of this. What has been the matter with Miss Beddoes?'

Cobbin looked at Sir Charles, but the

great doctor appeared perfectly unconscious of the appeal, so Cobbin answered,

'She's been poisoned.'

'Poisoned. Dear me! What a trouble for poor Mrs. Beddoes. I had better go and see her at once to inquire.'

'It's better she should not hear about Miss Sara,' said Cobbin. 'Sir Charles will tell her.'

Lord Stretton looked at the rough Australian and pitied him; but he did not like to hear his Lucy's name on his lips, so he rose to go.

'I had better go at once.'

'Don't mention names, sir. It is really better to say nothing about her daughter's illness to Mrs. Beddoes.'

'Pray, why not?'

'Because—well, sir, I believe you are a gentleman, though my Miss Sara thinks you are an ogre! You know that your

refusal to her engagement with your son just broke her heart.'

Lord Stretton was beginning to feel annoyed.

'I believe that you are the young lady's guardian; but Miss Beddoes has a mother, and I suppose I have rights over my son. Besides, Sir Charles will not care to listen to family differences.'

'I have already heard the outline of the story,' said the doctor, unmoved, 'and I must own to some surprise when I hear that you refused a daughter-in-law who has, according to her guardian, every virtue under the sun and unlimited means; but, as I told him, you have a right to your opinion, Lord Stretton, and the young lady will very soon be of age. I hope you have, however, better grounds for your refusal than those which appear on the surface.'

Lord Stretton did not mean to imitate Adam, and plead that Eve had done it, but brought face to face with the bare truth his opposition sounded ridiculous. He would have preferred that it should not become a matter of public talk.

'I have never encouraged my son to marry for money,' he said; 'but besides this the opposition was on the part of the lady's mother. Mrs. Beddoes quite refused to give her consent.'

'Then the kindest thing is to hush up the whole matter,' said Sir Charles. 'If, as I now hope, Miss Beddoes will recover, then, Lord Stretton, I should advise you to hasten her convalescence by withdrawing your opposition.'

'I am truly sorry for the young lady, but I can hardly see what right anyone has to dictate to me when——'

Cobbin had been looking at the speaker,

and he could not help being struck by the fine, open countenance. He began to feel sorry for him instead of hating him.

'We are going to take Miss Beddoes away, sir, as soon as she can be moved. It isn't safe for her to stay there any longer. Mrs. Beddoes is no fit guardian for a——'

'Excuse me, but I can hear nothing against Mrs. Beddoes,'—he paused; then he added—'I may as well say it now, for all the world will know it soon, Mrs. Beddoes will shortly become Lady Stretton.'

There was an awkward pause. Lord Stretton expected to see some look of surprise; but, on the contrary, neither the famous doctor nor the Australian miner appeared disturbed by the all important news.

'I had heard as much,' said Sir Charles,

'and now if you will excuse me I will go and imbibe a little fresh air.

He shook hands with Lord Stretton, and was gone.

Lord Stretton was going to follow his example,—indeed he was longing to get to his Lucy and to comfort her in all this trouble—when Cobbin interposed,

'One minute, Lord Stretton—Will you prepare Mrs. Beddoes for the removal of her daughter?'

'Indeed, I can do no such thing, and I must say that I should prefer the name of Mrs. Beddoes being kept out of all discussion.'

'Yes, sir, we all agree to that.'

'All? My affairs seem to have been thoroughly discussed.'

'Pretty thoroughly. Lumb knows them —awfully nice fellow—but we want your help, sir, about the removal of Miss Sara.'

'I have and will have nothing whatever to do with it.'

Cobbin ran his fingers through his hair. He wished for Sir Charles's presence, but not having it he had to make the best of the situation.

'I am afraid, sir, that we are in a little difficulty; but I think Mrs. Beddoes herself will see the advisability of washing her hands altogether of her daughter's affairs. Miss Sara, my Miss Sara,—the sweetest girl, sir, that I've ever come across—has very nearly died.'

'I am very sorry, but——'

'It will be said, sir, that she poisoned herself because of this love-affair.'

'We can hardly prevent or take notice of what will be said.'

Lord Stretton's sympathy went out to his absent Lucy, who had to put up with this man's rough ways.

'It had better be said though we know Miss Sara is incapable of such a thing, but——'

'Then pray leave it all in the doctor's hands.'

'But, sir, how are we to make sure that it will not happen again?'

Lord Stretton became impatient.

'When Miss Beddoes comes of age, it must be all gone into again. Before that time I hope that her mother may then be my wife.'

Lord Stretton felt proud to be at last able to acknowledge his Lucy in public. It seemed to raise him out of the past miserable life of sham, and to blot out his youthful weakness of purpose.

'That's as you like, sir, but it's no use beating about the bush. Will you recall your son, sir? Here is a telegram paper. Write on it something that will bring him back to see Miss Sara.'

'Without her mother's consent?—Never.'

'Without her mother's consent. It is best for—all parties. Miss Sara will soon get well if she is happy.'

'Then I fear I cannot help her recovery in that way.'

Cobbin unfolded a telegraph form, and dipped a pen in the ink.

'Indeed, sir, your best plan is to help it on in every conceivable manner, because—otherwise——'

'Otherwise——'

'We hold strong proofs that she would have come to her death by poison.'

'So you have said.'

'So I have said, but I did not add, administered by——'

'You did, administered by herself—I understood you perfectly; but I refuse to take the responsibility.'

'Excuse me, sir, but it was administered by her—her mother.'

Lord Stretton stared at the man before him, but he saw no sign of fear and no change of countenance.

'It's a lie,' he exclaimed, turning pale with anger, 'a diabolical lie!'

'It is the truth, and now you see why we must get her away.'

'A lie—a base conspiracy to injure a defenceless woman.'

Cobbin stood the shock firmly. He had faced angry miners, and was no coward.

Lord Stretton took up his hat.

'I will go to her at once. I will not be a party to these hidden accusations. You may take away the daughter if she will let you, and I will at once make Mrs. Beddoes my wife.'

Cobbin had meant to fight to the bitter

end. Suddenly a great pity came over him. This lord, this man who he had fancied was only a proud aristocrat, proved himself to be after all a noble fellow, and he had been taken in by—*her*!

'Wait,' he said, 'will you take a plain man's advice, sir?'

'Certainly not yours, after what you have said.'

'Write this telegram, let us take Miss Sara to her uncle's house, and then—I'll give Mrs. Beddoes half my fortune. It's useless to me. I only wanted it to make Farrer's people happy. She wants the money, and I don't.'

'I would not let Mrs. Beddoes touch a penny of your wretched gold, neither will I discuss this further with you.'

He was gone before Cobbin could add another word. Then Cobbin finished his breakfast in low spirits, and immediately

went out to find his way to the Manor. In spite of all that had been going on at the rectory, Chapel Stacey only knew in a vague sort of way that the young lady was ill. At the Manor, owing to Mr. Gwillian's action, no one knew the danger that Sara had passed through, nor had anyone informed them of it.

Just as Cobbin rang the bell at the Manor door, Lord Stretton was unexpectedly ushered into Lucy's presence.

CHAPTER XI.

A LATE CONSENT.

'Lucy!' he exclaimed, as the door shut behind Lumb. It was still gloomy and dull, the rectory drawing-room was less cheerful than usual, and Mrs. Beddoes was sitting in an arm-chair by the fire, doing nothing. She started up as she recognized her visitor. In a moment he was by her side. 'Lucy, how ill and tired you look, darling! I have heard of all your worries.'

Lucy stood up, and her eyes sought his face. It seemed to her as a harbour of

refuge. She read in it nothing but love and admiration. Then it must be that that mysterious accusation which she had read in Sir Charles's face had not been communicated to him. She was still his Lucy. She felt intensely grateful to him, and at this moment, weighed down as she was by a dull burden, she loved him, loved him as she had never hoped to do. Instead of feeling as if she must guide him, she now longed inexpressibly for his sheltering protection. She recognized that if he had sinned long ago, he was in comparison to her as white is to black. She had not yet argued herself into the belief that this was his fault.

'You have come. I am glad,' she said; and laid her pretty head on his shoulder, feeling that the touch of his kind hand was healing.

'Why didn't you telegraph? Why didn't

you write more particulars? Directly I got to the hotel I found that dreadful Cobbin there, and then Sir Charles came in. I did not know that the Australian had landed.'

'He came unexpectedly. Douglas, what did they tell you?'

She was longing to know the worst.

'Tell me,—why, a pack of lies. They said that Sara was suffering from poison, and that——'

'That what? They have said nothing to me.'

'I should think not! They say that in some way it is your fault.'

'They say so?'

'Yes, and now they insist upon removing Sara, and wish to force me to agree to the engagement. It is a regular cabal got up by that Cobbin in order to force our hands.

Lucy laughed a little hysterically, but her face was still hidden against his shoulder.

'Oh, Douglas! What did you say?'

'I said, darling, that I was going to make you my wife. All the world shall know it now immediately. There shall be nothing more concealed. The world is heartless towards an unprotected woman.'

'Yes, heartless. But, Douglas, I am weary of it all. Let Sara go where she likes, I am tired of—ingratitude, and take me away at once. If Percival likes it, let him come and take her. I wash my hands of them all. Take me away, take me away.'

She disengaged herself and sank down on the chair. Lord Stretton heard a little sob, a sob coming from the bottom of Lucy's heart. He had never seen her cry before, so he was horrified. He quickly thought over a possible plan.

'My sweet one, hush! You are overdone. None of them are worthy of you. Sara is a most unnatural daughter. I shall have nothing to do with her or Percival, they may go their own way. You are generous to give in to them, but they don't deserve it. Let us get married at once. I will get a special licence. As for the money, let that take care of itself. Actually that Cobbin tried to bribe me with half his fortune for you!'

'Cobbin did that?'

'Yes; I think, however, that I showed him plainly what I thought of him and of his bribes. Darling, you look ill. If Sir Charles had looked after you it would have been more humane. Let us do something to-day—now. What keeps you here? Let them go their own way.'

'Oh, yes, yes, let us go away to-day, Douglas. But will it look——No, I must

come back, but I could go up just for one or two nights to the London house, and then——

'Why must you come back? They have grossly insulted you.'

Lucy thought for a moment, and then she said,

'Write to Percival, and let us go before he comes. Oh, Douglas, let's hear no more arguments.'

'Of course. If we go to-day you might return to-morrow evening. Oh, my darling, tell me that you love me—even though I don't deserve it.'

'I love you.—You know it.—But I'm not thinking enough of you. Have you had lunch? It is nearly one o'clock. I thought the morning would never go, but now it is all right because you are here.'

She started up again and put her arm round his neck.

They were happy then. Life was a new experience at that moment for him and for her. Douglas was the way of safety. She had looked into a dark abyss, and she had been terribly afraid. Fear had unnerved her. Circumstances had been too much for her, though even now, looking back, she said,

'They can prove nothing.'

Lucy rang the bell, and Lumb appeared.

'I will have lunch at once. Send Harriet here.'

'By the way, shall I speak to the servants, Lucy? I can't bear even their gossip to touch you.'

'No, no, say nothing, I am not afraid of gossip. I hate this place. I have wanted you, Douglas, so much—so much.'

Never before had he heard such words from her. Never had the ring of her voice

been so true. She put a sheet of paper and a pen ready for him.

'Douglas, write to your son. Two words will do. Tell him that he may marry Sara. Don't say a word about me.'

He obeyed.

'Lucy, you are the most generous woman on earth.'

She shook her head, and a faint smile flitted across her lips.

'It isn't true, but I like to hear you say so. Would you really——' She paused, and Harriet entered at the same moment as the luncheon-bell rang.

'Has the second nurse come, Harriet?'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'Then there is no need of further nursing. I must go to London by the three o'clock train. Pack my things at once. I shall want you to come with me, so make

haste, but say nothing to anyone about it.

Harriet retired.

'Now, Douglas, come and eat something. To-morrow we can——'

'But, sweetest, I meant to make a great affair of it, and this—I must telegraph to my lawyer.'

'No, no,—I like this best. Quite quiet —I want you, nothing else, nothing else.'

Before anyone knew what was happening, Mrs. Beddoes and Lord Stretton were on their way to London.

Little suspecting how easy the solution was made for him, Cobbin on his side was ushered into Mrs. Gwillian's presence, and at once he felt reassured. There was about her the same kind, homely cordiality which had attracted him so deeply to his ward. Mrs. Gwillian was knitting by the fireside. Her motherly mind at once jumped to the right conclusion.

'Mr. Cobbin, you are back again, and I am sure something is very much the matter with my dear Sara. I have been longing to see her. Where is Herringham? Do you wish to see my husband? We wanted to see you. My poor child, she is not at all happy. Can't you take her away?'

'Indeed, ma'am, that's what I have come about. I want you to come with me right along and nurse your niece. The sight of your face will do her good.'

'But I can't, my husband will not let me. Here he is. Father, here is Mr. Cobbin, Sara's kind guardian.'

Mr. Gwillian, stern and stiff as usual, glanced at the new comer with a somewhat suspicious look.

'Has Sara or has her mother sent you here? I can have no communication with Mrs. Beddoes.'

'I've come myself, sir, and with your leave—and maybe without it—I am going to take Mrs. Gwillian to Miss Sara. She's been at death's door.'

'Oh, Tom! and we never knew it! My poor child, I must go to her.'

Herringham hurried in at this instant.

'Mother! Sara's dying, it's all over the village. You must go to her.' Then, seeing a stranger, he stopped

'I'm Jethro Cobbin, sir, Miss Sara's guardian. Miss Sara's not dying, and I don't mean her to, but she's very ill, and wants a real mother to see after her.'

'We have no right to go,' said Mr. Gwillian. 'Even if I gave my wife leave, Mrs. Beddoes would insult her.'

'No, I'll take care of that, only come. I'll wait ten minutes, ma'am, whilst you get your things ready, and you can sleep

in the room next to Miss Sara. I kept guard there last night.'

'You!'

'Me and Lumb. I may as well say it now as soon as later, sir: Lumb saved Miss Sara's life. He's a man in a thousand.'

There was no resisting Cobbin. He was so kind, so decided, so urgent, that Mr. Gwillian gave in. If Sara should die without one loving word, he knew that his wife would never get over it. When Mrs. Gwillian was gone upstairs, and Herringham had departed to find his sister, Cobbin took Mr. Gwillian into his confidence.

'We can't prove it, Sir Charles says. The prescription was all right, and there would be only Lumb's word against hers. She burnt every scrap of paper, but it would have to come into a law court, and

the daughter would have to give evidence. No, it's impossible, quite impossible: only you see why we are anxious to get her away.'

When the sense of Cobbin's words had penetrated his brain, Mr. Gwillian seemed tongue-tied. Then long-pent-in feeling gave way, and he hid his face in his hands.

'It can't be true; it can't be true,' he said.

'I could trust every word Lumb speaks, and he don't say many. If he had not tampered with the last packets, Sara would have been dead by now: and her mother gave her those last three, but who is to prove it? No one knew the number, no court would accept our evidence—and yet it's true, sir, true as I stand here!'

'Lucy did this—Lucy! My little sister! Oh, no, no, it is not true. She was

such a lovely child—no, no, I cannot believe it!'

The hardness of many years melted. The sin seemed to overpower him, and to fill his soul with tumult of despair. He had imputed much to her, he had fancied she could do anything, but not that—not a crime!

'What shall you do?' he said at last.

'Nothing: what can we do? We have saved Sara: but as for pity—no, sir, I can't feel any. Then she is not my sister. She will go scot-free: we couldn't prove it, it's quite impossible. It will be thought that Sara did it herself if the subject comes out, and it is not safe to question her.'

'Poor, poor Lucy!'

'Lord Stretton's come, and says he means to marry her. He won't believe a word of it, of course.'

'He must not marry her—I shall see him.'

'As well spare yourself trouble, sir. She can throw dust in his eyes, depend on it.'

There was time for no more words before Mrs. Gwillian reappeared, and Cobbin found the pony-carriage at the door. Virginia was putting in some things for the invalid, saying,

'Sara will like to think it comes from home.'

When they reached the rectory, the great shutters were thrown back and there was a look of less sadness than usual about the place. Cobbin rang the bell, feeling that he must be firm and that he must brave Mrs. Beddoes; but when Lumb appeared there was a faint smile on his face.

'Oh, sir, come in; Mrs. Beddoes is gone, and she left this card for you.'

Cobbin read it.

'I am obliged to go to town for a night. Mrs. Gwillian will come if you ask her from me.'

'Why,' said Cobbin, 'I'm beggared, she's gone! Lumb, did you know this?'

'Mrs. Beddoes took Harriet, and Lord Stretton went to the station with them.'

This had been said in low tones, and now Mrs. Gwillian was told that there was no hindrance to her seeing her niece. Sir Charles had left for town, and Lumb had received his last instructions.

'When she sees you, ma'am, there'll be no need of Sir Charles Trevor.'

'Did he tell that young conceit of a doctor his duty, Lumb?' asked Cobbin.

'The young one takes all the praise,

sir, so I suppose it's all right. Shall I order dinner? Mrs. Beddoes left no orders.'

It was in this way that Jethro Cobbin suddenly found himself placed, for the time being, at the head of a ready-made household, and that evening Mr. Gwillian as well as Herringham and Virginia stepped over the threshold of the rectory. Upstairs the invalid was kept quite quiet, but when she saw her aunt sitting by her and when she heard soft, cheering words of love, a smile of happiness passed over her white lips.

'She'll do now,' said the nurse. 'She wanted rousing.'

'Darling,' whispered Aunt Lil, 'you must make haste and get well.'

Sara closed her eyes.

'Does mother know you are here?' she whispered.

'Your mother has left you to my care, dearest,—that is, to Mr. Cobbin and to me.'

'Is it true? Aunt Lil! Aunt Lil, kiss me. I don't mind dying now that mother has let you come here.'

'Nonsense, child! You don't mind living, you mean.'

'I saw Guardian in my dreams here close beside me, and Lumb too. Kind Lumb!'

'Not dreams, darling. You have had all sorts of nurses, it seems to me, and now go to sleep, and nurse and I will sit beside you.'

'I shall sleep now—oh, so soundly;' and Sara smiled the smile of a tired, thankful child.

Mr. Gwillian waited till the next day, hoping that his sister would write a line to some one. But in the morning a

telegram came from Percival addressed to Mrs. Beddoes, announcing his immediate arrival.

'I shall wait and see him, and then I must go to Lucy. She must not do this thing,' he said, and he recalled the conversation which he had had with Percival on the mountain top. He had never thought of crime then. He would go to Lucy and tell her that she could have a home with him. She must be sad and sorry now. Madness must have seized her, but in future she could live at the Manor apart from the world whose laws she had broken. That the crime was not known seemed nothing to Mr. Gwillian. He had heard all the details from Lumb, so how could he still doubt it?

'God will forgive her, and I must. Blood is thicker than water after all. Oh, Lucy, Lucy!' The knowledge of his sis-

ter's sin seemed to weigh him down. It was not a thing that could be proved, but that made no difference to him. Lucy, his sister, had done this thing, but she must be sorry. She must want shelter, and he would give it to her.

Percival received his father's note as he and Clara sat at the breakfast table. He suddenly exclaimed,

'Look, Clara. Here is a letter from father. It is dated from the rectory; then he went there—not to Stacey, as he said. Good heavens! It is that woman again.'

'What does he say?'

'More strange still. Listen; "Miss Beddoes has been very ill. Will you come to Chapel Stacey at once to see her? We, her mother and I, will no longer withhold our consent to your engagement, though at the same time we are deeply grieved at the ingratitude that you have both shown.

You will find a note from me awaiting you at Chapel Stacey if I have gone home before you come.'

'What does this mean, Clara? It seems too good to be true, but——'

'Why, of course, it means that father is at last ashamed of his useless opposition, and——'

'But he says "We." I shall go at once. My poor Sara, she is ill, she wants me. I can't believe that it is true yet. What I most fear is that that woman has got hold of him.'

'I knew that it would all come right,' said Clara, shutting her eyes to that other possibility.

Percival felt that this sudden turn of events meant more than it said. His father had seen Mrs. Beddoes, and he had somehow managed to get her consent, but at what price? All the way to Chapel

Stacey his mind was torn with conflicting thoughts, but the nearer he approached the station the more anxious he became. How slow the express train went, how interminable was the journey, how callous were the officials. What would Sara think, feel, say? And Mrs. Beddoes, how would she receive him? Suddenly all his mental pictures were dissolved, for nothing happened as he had imagined it. At the station it was Lumb and not his own father who met him.

'How is Miss Beddoes?' exclaimed Percival.

'She is better to-day. She has asked for you; but, indeed, sir, you must be prepared for a great change in her. It will take weeks before she is well. Mrs. Gwillian is nursing her.'

'I am indeed glad. Is my father here?'

'No, but he left a note for you, sir. Here it is. Mr. Cobbin has returned and is at the rectory, but Mr. Gwillian has gone up to town.'

Percival tore it open, and read the fatal words:

'My dear Percival,

'I believe that you have long known of my feeling towards Mrs. Beddoes. Before you will read this note, or rather before we meet again, I shall have made her my wife. I owe you an apology for not giving you the chance of seeing her, but from past words I hardly dare hope that you will respect my feelings enough to show courtesy if not love to my wife. Her last act was to plead for you and her daughter Sara, and to give her consent to your marriage. No other woman would have given in so gracefully and so kindly.

May you in the future, my dear Percival, learn to love and admire one who has not her equal. Tell Clara this. I shall leave all business matters till I can have Lady Stretton's help and advice.

'Your affectionate father,

'STRETTON.'

Percival paused.

'Lumb, I must go to town at once. I will come back. I must see my father. I have bad news.'

'Mr. Gwillian has gone to the London house too, sir. Perhaps you will come back together.'

CHAPTER XII.

BROTHER AND SISTER.

Mrs. Beddoes was once more in the pretty London drawing-room where she had first fully realized that she could attain the object of her life. She had been very busy all the morning, but now she was waiting ready dressed, for at any moment Lord Stretton might come to fetch her. They were going to be married by special licence at two o'clock in an obscure, little City church, and no one was to be present but Harriet and the clerk.

Lucy had arrayed herself in the softest

and loveliest of grey silk dresses, and now she stood before the glass, and gazed at herself with quiet admiration. This was the last hour of her old life, the last hour of the life which she had hated and scorned so intensely, but now she had reached the goal which she had set before herself, if not in the way she had meant to reach it, at least in a way opening out future possibilities. Very soon she would be Lady Stretton, the beautiful wife of Lord Stretton, of Stacey Hall, his old love, who had waited for him for years, and whom he had never really forgotten.

She was very pale, except for two bright spots on her cheeks which added to her beauty, but which Lucy knew meant that she was very tired and very feverish. Yes, she was very tired; the last few months of her life had been so long, so very long, they seemed as years, and not merely as

months. During that time she had experienced the feeling of a black nightmare, but she had stepped out of it now, and in a strange, dim manner she wished that she had never gone through it. She would like to blot out this period from her memory, to wash it off the surface of her consciousness, where, like indelible writing, it reappeared even when she tried to efface it. It was not that she was sorry, it was not that she hated Sara less; no, she still hated her, if anything even more now that she thought of her as being surrounded with everything that could make life happy if, that is, she returned to life. But if——Lucy paused again. Why should she think of it? She would not do so. It was done and over. Now and then there came over her a feeling of wonderful relief, embodied in the thought that

she had not done that thing, and that Sara still lived.

How was it that suspicion had been excited? That idea still troubled her very much. She thought over all the episode, and settled that at no time had anyone seen her do that compromising thing. She had burnt every trace of—that thing. The doctor's prescription had been carried out exactly. There was no proof against her. She could defy anyone to find proofs, legal proofs; proofs, that is, that would stand the keen eyes of lawyers. There were none. She had not done that thing really. What a difference there is between a deed done, and a deed attempted. Murder—what is it? Why, mental murder is committed every day, and who thinks anything of it? Men look at their elderly relations, and specu-

late when they will die. Women dream of the death of their rivals, and wish for it,—yes, wish for it strongly, and no one blames them. The deed has not been done. In that lies the difference. The law does not meddle with wishes, if the deed is not done. But, mentally, where is the difference? If the wish is father to the deed, if, as the Bible says, 'for a man to look upon a woman is the same as committing adultery already in the heart,' then in like manner how many commit murder already in the heart? Can hatred be easily overcome? Can some be more guilty than others, when the first thought makes all equally guilty? Is the deed worse than the thought? In the eyes of the world only, but the world's judgment is proverbially false. Who had blamed Douglas for forsaking her, for making her bear that which even now caused her mental pain?

He had been honoured all his life, but his first guilt had led to hers. Actions are not separable from their surroundings. He was guilty if she was. Sara was the result of his guilt. She had never been able to love this child of hers, born of hatred, and the child of the man she had married in pique, and whom she had despised because her heart had been given once and for ever. It was Douglas's fault. All her life of apparent contradiction had been caused by his failure of principle, and why was she now to be blamed for it, and why was she to bear alone all the consequences of his first sin.

Surely somewhere there was justice meted out, somewhere where the first who causes his brother to sin would at last be made to accept all the responsibility of that sin. That, perhaps, might be called justice; but the other, the justice of the

world, the justice that blamed a weak, defenceless woman for trying to shape her own life, and for trying to regain her lost happiness—no, that was not true justice, only an imitation of it which Lucy rejected.

She walked away from the glass, and sat down on a low couch. She rested her arm against the back of it, and leant her burning forehead against her hand. Why did she go on with this ceaseless argument? She wanted her mind to be quite calm, quite free from past thoughts, so that she might take in all the new ideas, and that she might register new emotions, new life, new love. She had never had any. Her husband's love had been hateful to her. She had never known the ecstacy of loving and being loved in all its beautiful fulness. Only now was that coming, now she would feel what a good

man's love could be, if a woman was willing to return it in full. Douglas was good and kind. He had certainly been weak in the past, weak and cruel towards her, but he had been influenced by his mother. She had been a stern, powerful, domineering woman, whose pride had managed to spoil her life and her son's life for him. He had never known what a woman's love could accomplish. He should know it now. How sweet it had been to feel him by her side when the world turned against her. Guilt or no guilt was nothing to him. He loved her for herself. But did he? Would he love her if he knew? Of course he was weak, but weakness has its good side. It cannot resist the strong fascination of a woman who loves.

There she was again weighing ideas, things of no weight. She wanted to look

her best and to feel at her best for Douglas. She must not wear herself out. He was coming home with her. For the sake of appearance, she must return to that house unless Sara could first be moved. But, perhaps, they would move the girl, and then, once under the care of Mrs. Gwillian, there would be no need for her to stay on in that hateful spot.

She must make one last supreme effort to be her old self, to be cold and collected before the eyes of that little, spiteful world. She must see Percival, and she must make the best of a bad business. Most likely he would not retain his fortune if she gave him leave to marry Sara. She did not want to be a poor Lady Stretton, that prospect did not smile on her at all, but with a little management she might save the bulk of the money and yet exile Percival and Clara. As for Sara——

Suddenly she started up, for she distinctly heard the door-bell ring. She went to the fireside, and looked at herself in the glass.

She was very tired, and she did not want to agitate herself. She must be calm, but the effort to suppress excitement was great. Could it be Douglas who was coming? It was still somewhat early for him. Only Harriet and a char-woman were in the house. They would say 'Not at home,' to anyone else who might happen to call, those were her orders. She listened attentively. It could not be Douglas, for he would have run up the stairs quickly, and by now he would have been by her side, telling her that she was very perfect and very beautiful.

But there were steps approaching, slow, decided steps. It must be——Tom! Why had Harriet let him come in? She looked

round for a means of escape, but almost immediately Mr. Gwillian was by her side.

'Lucy!'

She heard the old familiar tones of her childhood, the voice of her brother, belonging to the period when he had been domineering but kind, and when she had admired him as being a future man, strong and impartial.

'Why did you come?' she said, regaining her composure, but sitting down and motioning him to do the same.

'To stop your marriage with Lord Stretton.'

Lucy laughed, and the laugh was not forced; for the moment she was amused to think that Tom imagined that he could do this thing.

'You might have spared yourself the trouble.'

'I might, but I could not When I was

dying, Lucy, I should have thought that I did nothing, I should say to myself, I did not—try to call her back.'

Lucy changed her tone, she was intensely annoyed at her brother's line of action. He was not abusive or angry, but only serious and pathetic. She hated pathos at this moment more than anger or abuse.

'Lord Stretton may be here at any moment. When he comes, I and Harriet shall go with him alone, unless you like to accompany us.'

'I cannot give my consent, Lucy. I stand in the place of your father now. You have no other relation. Give it up.'

'Indeed! My only relation has not been very cordial of late years, I should say.'

She put as much scorn as she could in her tone, but in reality she was afraid of Tom, she who before to-day had never

feared anyone. She longed for Douglas to come and protect her.

'That was your own doing, Lucy. But I am come about a more serious matter. You are marrying this man without telling him what you have done.'

'What have I done? What is all this mystery about?' she asked, her anger suddenly aroused, and she even impatiently stamped her foot. 'Why do you come here to persecute me; me, who all my life long have had to fight for myself against a back-biting world? Have I ever begged of you, Tom, in my poverty? Have I been a burden on you? Why do you come now, —now, when I least want you? Go, please, I will hear no more.'

The tall, thin, stern man rose to his full height.

'I do not wish to stay. Tell me, where is Lord Stretton?'

'I have told you that he is coming here. Stay if you like, tell him what you like, and see if he will believe you.'

'Lucy, *you* must tell him, you must be honest, and then God help you. He may be above the common run of mankind, but do not deceive him.'

'What shall I tell him?' She spoke slowly, each word sounding like a distinct note of music.

'Tell him that you hate your child, your only child, and that you have been a bad, unnatural mother to her. Tell him that you tried to—to—I cannot say it, Lucy, you are my sister, but that man, that man is nothing to you yet.'

Through the silent house, at that instant, there was again the sound of the door-bell. Lucy firmly grasped the back of a tall chair, and this slight action spoke of her deep, concentrated force of will.

'There is Lord Stretton, Tom; stay here and I give you leave to tell him yourself. But tell him what are your proofs. Gossip of servants, and the hatred of a vulgar Australian miner who sticks at no lies.'

'I shall not say anything, Lucy, if you will do it. Remember that I am your brother. I come here to defend you, to shield you from the sentence of the world, not to hide your sin. I will bear the shame with you, but don't let another become one with you—and with your crime.'

Evidently Lord Stretton had waited a moment to question Harriet about the unexpected visitor. In another instant, however, Lucy heard him run upstairs just as she had imagined it a little while ago, but he would not now be able to come up to her to kiss her and to praise her with soft words. Why had Tom come? She

was weary enough without this new scene. She felt like a hunted animal, she only wanted a burrow to hide herself in till the storm raging without should have calmed itself; but she must fight to the end, and she would satisfy Tom and show him how useless was his errand.

'Douglas, here is my brother. He has kindly come up here, now at the last moment, to inform you of that report you heard at Chapel Stacey. I will save him the trouble. He says that I gave Sara the poisonous powders, he says that I caused her illness, he says that—that—— Well, then, to satisfy him I will say it too, I did it, I did it. Now, Tom, are you satisfied? Douglas, you hear me? It will please them all and they can repeat it, oh! yes, to all the world if they like.'

As she stood there, her face glowing with colour, her eyes flashing bright defi-

ance, one hand slightly trembling as she crumpled the Honiton lace of her dress, and the other grasping the oak back of the chair, Lucy Beddoes looked extraordinarily beautiful, and, what was more in her favour, to all appearance she was a woman hunted down and brought to shame by a man, and that man her own brother.

'My dearest Lucy, pray don't agitate yourself like this,' said Lord Stretton, coming up to the woman he was about to make his wife. Then turning to Mr. Gwillian he said, his voice full of scorn and anger, 'And you, sir, what right have you to come and insult your sister like this, and at such a moment?'

'The right that every honest man possesses, Lord Stretton. You have heard my sister's statement. You had better let her come home with me. Think of

your children, your son. You have a name to keep clean. If ours has been dragged very low, I must accept this punishment from the hand of God, but no one shall say that I tried to hide my own shame so as to advance my family.'

Lord Stretton's faith felt suddenly shaken as Mr. Gwillian went on speaking. It was impossible to look at him and to believe that he would wilfully deceive anyone. Lucy, who was gazing intently on her lover's face, saw his expression changing.

'Well, Douglas,' she said, scornfully, 'you had better let me go back with my brother. You see what he thinks of me, and he could make a *strong* man waver, much more a *weak* one.' She gave a scornful emphasis to the words *strong* and *weak*. It touched, as she knew that it would, Lord Stretton in his tenderest feelings.

He had once been weak, and that wound was still very tender.

'It is all nonsense, you are quite overdone. Lucy, the carriage is at the door. Are you ready?'

'Yes, I am quite ready—but, Douglas—you heard—are you willing, are you prepared——?'

'Lucy, come home,' said Mr. Gwillian, taking no heed of any of her words. 'You can——'

'I shall never come to your home, never,' she answered angrily, remembering that for a moment Tom had shaken Lord Stretton's faith, and she felt irritated by the feeling that even yet she was not fully master of him. At this moment she deeply repented her action, but hers was the repentance of angry failure. Why had she fallen into this pit-fall? why had she looked down into this abyss of crime?

For a few seconds she turned away from Lord Stretton.

'I will go away from you all. I will not be——'

'Come, Lucy,' said Lord Stretton, with all the chivalry which was such a feature in his character. 'Come, dearest, did you not hear me say that the carriage was at the door?'

Lucy rang the bell, and Harriet appeared so quickly that she must have been close at hand.

'Harriet, is everything ready? Take my cloak to the carriage. Now, Tom, are you coming—or are you going away?'

'I am going away. Lord Stretton, I have been honest with you. Remember, in the future, that you have but yourself to thank for your misfortune.'

Lord Stretton bowed, and offered his arm to Lucy. They walked down the

stairs in silence. Lucy felt that her strength would only just hold out, but to herself she said, still clinging to false truth,

'I have not deceived him, I have told him that I did it!'

Just as they reached the hall, Percival was entering the front door. He took in the scene at one glance. Lucy could bear it no longer.

'Douglas, come at once, or I will go. I cannot stand another scene.' She swept past Percival without looking at him, and entered the carriage.

'Father, I had your letter—I beseech you—not like this—Think of Clara, at least telegraph to her.'

'Mr. Gwillian is upstairs, Percival—You forget yourself. Mrs. Beddoes is waiting.'

'But father, indeed, you are forgetting ——I am sure—wait——'

Lord Stretton frowned, and passed on. The footman closed the door, and the carriage drove off.

Mr. Gwillian touched the young man on the arm.

'Come home with me, Mr. Osborne. Sara wants you. We must accept the inevitable.'

'She will ruin his life,' said Percival. 'Poor Clara! and I have not kept my promise.'

'Come,' repeated Mr. Gwillian. 'There is a death of the ideal, and those who kill it need all our sympathy—and our—our—love.'

CHAPTER XIII.

LOVE, THE HEALER AND DESTROYER.

Percival stood a moment silent in the hall, and realized that he had failed. His self-denial, his abnegation, his devotion to his father—all had been useless. Worse, he realized that from the beginning and through some unfortunate fate he had helped on that which he hoped to prevent. He heaved a sigh, but it was almost a sigh of relief. His trial was over, he could now think only of Sara.

At that moment he remembered Mr.

Gwillian's presence. There was mutual if silent sympathy in their greeting.

'I came too late, but I see my mistake now. I have been forbidding the tide to rise. Perhaps, after all, they will be happy, and perhaps it was——'

The elder man placed his hand on Percival's shoulder.

'I also came too late. No, they will not be happy. What is begun in sin must end in sorrow. We, however, can do no more. Come, I shall take Sara to my own home. It must be done; she and her mother must never meet again.'

'But Sara is fond of her mother, so true and loyal to her. You must not separate them.'

Mr. Gwillian turned towards Percival, whose open countenance spoke of hope and trust. He at least had nothing to hide, nothing to be ashamed of. It did

Mr. Gwillian good to look at him, for he felt sure that here was a man that could be trusted, and one to whom he could give Sara and feel sure of her happiness. On the other hand, that painful story might cast a shadow between the families. Could Osborne forgive Sara's mother? would he care to be associated with one who, in thought, had——But all the way home he could not make up his mind to speak. It was only when they reached Chapel Stacey station, and whilst they were walking in the dusk to the rectory, that he summoned up courage to speak.

'Osborne, are you sure that you can forgive Sara's mother enough to be true to her daughter?'

'How can you ask! Besides, Mrs. Beddoes has done nothing wrong; the wrong, if any, is on my father's side. He has behaved in a heartless manner to my

sister. This hasty action means turning her adrift, for I am sure that Mrs. Beddoes will brook no rival.'

'That is true. My unhappy sister could brook no rival, and in some mysterious way her own daughter was her rival. She wished to get her out of her sight.'

'We had better not put our thoughts into words,' said Percival. 'By this time I suppose that she is my father's wife, and she is also Sara's mother.'

'And she is my sister, but I may not let you go blind-folded into our unhappy family, stained with crime. We must all share the penalty.'

'Crime! forgive me, Mr. Gwillian, but I cannot hear you speak thus of one to whom I shall be bound to show respect.'

'Listen, Osborne, and judge. You will hear it from others, but let me speak first, because it is my duty.' Then slowly and

painfully he unfolded the story of Sara's illness.

When they reached the rectory grounds, now plunged in darkness, the elder man paused.

'After what you have heard, will you go in?'

'Sara knows that nothing on earth can make any difference between us. She has suffered enough, but I entreat you, never let her hear this, nor suspect it. I will bear the burden of the knowledge for her, for both of us.' Mr. Gwillian wrung his hand in silence; then he touched the bell, and Lumb, followed closely by Virginia, let them in.

'How is she?' asked Mr. Gwillian, anxiously. 'Virginia, here is Mr. Osborne. He will help to bring back health to our poor child.'

Virginia held out her hand.

'She is better. She will get well, but we must prepare her for your coming. It will be almost too much for her. She is so nervous and she is so changed. Oh, it is dreadful.'

Herringham and Cobbin came out of the drawing-room, and the two young men met face to face.

'Welcome back,' said Cobbin, whose face was all smiles. 'I said you would come back soon.'

'Your coming will save her,' said Herringham, shaking hands with his rival. 'My mother has been promising her you would come. She wants you, and she asks for you.'

Virginia ran upstairs to tell her mother, but the trained nurse had first to be propitiated.

'The doctor would be displeased,' she said, 'and she had no orders about strangers. It was an unheard-of thing,' and so on, till Mrs. Gwillian took all the responsibility on herself.

When Percival entered the sick-room, his heart beat fast; it was as if he were entering a sacred shrine. The shaded lamps could not altogether hide the deathly pallor of Sara's face, but now she was quite conscious and the attacks of pain were much less frequent. The nurse retired to the window, and Percival took the thin white hand in his. The shock of seeing his beautiful Sara brought so low nearly made him speechless. A feeling of hatred against the woman who had brought this about seized him, and, in his heart, he could not forgive her. He thought, 'Mother was right, doubly right, when

she warned me. Why have I betrayed her trust? the punishment has fallen on me.'

'Darling,' he whispered, 'darling, I have come.'

'I knew you would come. I expected you, I always trusted you. Percival, listen. Where is mother?'

'She has gone away. Don't be afraid.'

'Oh, no, not now. Aunt Lil is here and you, but don't go far away again. It was so dreadful.'

'My darling, my poor darling, I have been a fool to leave you so long.'

'No, you were right; but listen, Percival. When mother comes back, tell her that she must take it all.'

'Take what, my sweet one?'

'My money. We don't want it, do we? Let her have it. She wanted the

money. Oh, Percival, she does not love me.'

'But, dearest, Mr. Cobbin——'

Sara clasped his hand more firmly.

'Then tell Guardian that I wish it. Let her take half, if Mr. Cobbin won't give the whole. Yes, please, please do. She may like me then, a little, just a little.'

'I will tell him. Anything you wish shall be done, but get well, only get well, dearest.'

She smiled. He had never seen that smile before on Sara's face. It was the smile of one who has suffered, but who has come through suffering into joy.

Presently they drove him away, and he went to find Cobbin.

'Well, she is first-class now, isn't she?'

'Oh,' said Percival, with tears in his eyes, 'she has suffered so much, and I never knew it.'

'No use looking back. She'll pull through, and we must move her as soon as possible.'

'She sent you a message. She wants her mother to have half her money.'

'I'm beggared! Not one penny of it! I have written to Profitt. I find he made Sara's will when I was away, and her confounded mother—beg pardon, sir, I was forgetting she is in your family now—Well, the will gives the mother all the money, with a paltry legacy to Mr. Gwillian. It's to be torn up at once.'

'It was right to make her will, but money has been our curse all along.'

'That's nonsense, sir. It's as often the want of it that makes knaves. But as

to giving Mrs. Beddoes the half of Sara's wealth, it turns my stomach, indeed it does.'

'Sara will, I am sure, do it when she comes of age—that is, if she can.'

'She's too generous. No, it mustn't be, and to think the dear girl was nearly done for.'

Lumb entered with a telegram. He had regained his normal condition of a working machine.

'Mr. Osborne, that's the man who deserves a mine of wealth,' said Cobbin, slapping Lumb on the shoulder.

Percival grasped the butler's hand, and shook it warmly.

'You must never leave us, Lumb, your wife must come and live with us too.'

'Miss Sara's getting on,' said Lumb, 'but there's to be no agitation,' he added,

sternly. 'Here's a telegram for you, sir.'

Instead of retiring, Lumb waited for news, he seemed now to be quite one of the family. Mr. Gwillian at this moment also hurried in.

Percival read the words aloud:

'*Lady Stretton and myself have missed train. Cannot come till to-morrow. If Miss Beddoes has fairly recovered, we shall go abroad.*'

Percival looked much troubled as he said,

'Poor Clara. I must go to her to-morrow and talk over plans. I cannot bear to see my father yet, at least not till I have comforted my sister. This act of his is a great shock to us, but don't let anyone worry Sara about it. She must know

nothing. That is the chief thing to be now thought of. Still for Clara's sake I cannot help shrinking from the comments of the neighbourhood.'

'You have not yet learnt to despise what the world says, Osborne. You are young, but by and by you will care only for the verdict of your own conscience,' said Mr. Gwillian.

'I think that at least Sara and I shall have learnt how to spend our money.'

'You had better go at once to your sister, and as soon as Sara is moved I will let you know. No need to meet your father again just yet,' said Mr. Gwillian, kindly.

'I have no wish to do so. I will go, but I shall be longing to hear how Sara is every moment of the day. Some one must telegraph to me.'

In spite of his own sadness, Mr. Gwillian smiled and Cobbin broke in with,

'I can do that, Mr. Osborne. I shall want exercise, and I must run up to town to settle everything for Miss Sara's coming of age. I've set my heart on grand doings; so you may as well marry her first, and Lumb shall help me to choose the furniture. Eh, Lumb, do you remember about Louis XIV. and Queen Anne?'

Before night closed in, the rectory was once more silent. Mrs. Gwillian stayed, but Herringham, Virginia, and Mr. Gwillian all returned home. Cobbin retired to the hotel, and Lumb was left to guard the house. The night nurse relieved the day nurse, and Mrs. Gwillian had a bed made up for herself in the sitting-room. Sara was now surrounded with loving

care and attention, and when the astonished doctor came it was to find his patient under a new rule. 'Mrs. Beddoes had been unexpectedly summoned to town,' was all that he heard, but the tongue of gossip had already begun to hint that Mrs. Beddoes had changed her name, and that Lord Stretton had hastily come to claim her. To this certain truth an extraordinary amount of fiction was mixed, but all this did not penetrate into the sick-room, where Sara, with a smile of deep happiness on her lips, soon fell into a natural sleep.

She was by nature possessed of a strong constitution, though the young doctor took care to attribute her recovery to his skill. He had, he said, guessed at once that she had been tampering with poison, and this quick diagnosis had saved the patient.

No one contradicted him, and he felt that his reputation was now firmly established.

The next day, just when it was too dark to distinguish any faces, Lord Stretton stepped out of the train at Chapel Stacey and handed his wife out. By chance there was a fly waiting outside, and the two got into it and told the coachman to drive to the rectory.

As they drew near to the lodge, Lucy placed her hand on her husband's arm, and he felt her head lightly resting against him.

'My sweetest, my darling, don't mind. It is all blown over now. If Percival is here, I shall insist on his behaving properly to you.'

'You have promised, Douglas, that they shall not return to Stacey Hall.'

'Certainly, darling, if you insist.'

Lord Stretton, however, spoke doubtfully. He loved his children, he had not realized how much he loved them till this moment when his wife was insisting on their banishment.

'Oh, Douglas, you promised. If we must be poor, if we shall have to bear reproach for making a love-match, at least—at least let us be alone. I can do so much for you. I can help you to take your proper place in the county. She never did. Oh, I know that I can do it, only I want you all to myself—yes, all, all.'

A strange new feeling came over Lord Stretton. He realized that he would have to give in to Lucy, not in this thing only but in all others. He certainly loved her, his love was strong, manly, intensely real,

but he was no longer free. This new power had taken possession of him; it held him, not only by his willing affection, but by even more powerful cords, and he also realized that all his higher aspirations, all the firm love of fatherhood, all the close binding that held him to Percival must go too. The future might provide new spheres of usefulness, new hopes, new aspirations, but he saw that all the old landmarks to which he had clung when life seemed but a great disappointment, were now to be swept away at one stroke, and at the wish and the will of one woman. Like Samson, he has indeed become weak. This feeling was not less strong because he could not define it, nor put it into words. But after all, and in spite of all, he had won this perfect, beautiful woman, the best of her sex; his old

love was now his wife, his very own.

Lucy was still very weary, very feverish, but outwardly she was calm. Her husband knew nothing of her suffering, he only realized that she was a new joy to him, and that her perfection filled him with wondrous delight. To refuse her anything was impossible, not now at least, not now when she had given him everything that she had to give, herself and her deep love.

The fly stopped at the door, and the door-bell was rung. Lucy clung to her husband, she felt strongly that she wanted his protection. What faces should she see in this house?

Only Lumb stood at the open door, straight, stiff, and most correct as usual.

Lord Stretton got down, and helped out his wife with that tender care which is very sweet to a woman.

'How is Miss Beddoes?' he asked. 'I hope the doctor gives a good report of her.'

'Yes, my lord. Miss Sara is to be moved to-morrow morning. The doctor gives leave. Dinner will be ready immediately.'

There was no one to receive them, and no one but Lumb to tell them anything.

'Is my son here?' asked Lord Stretton, with a slight hesitation.

'No, my lord, Mr. Osborne has gone back to Bournemouth. No one is here but Mrs. Gwillian, and she is in the sick-room. The orders are that no one must disturb Miss Sara.'

So Percival was not here! Lord Stretton heaved a sigh of relief. To-day at least he need not tell his son that he and his sister had no longer a home with him.

'Is Mr. Cobbin here?' said Lucy, softly.

'No, my lady, Mr. Cobbin has gone down to the Manor for the evening.'

These two did not certainly want outsiders, and yet there was a strange feeling on Lord Stretton's part of being left entirely out of the life which he had so lately shared with Percival.

'As Miss Sara is to be moved to-morrow, Lumb,' said Lucy, a little haughtily, 'we shall not stay after to-night. Harriet can finish doing my packing, and to-morrow we can go home. You will send for the carriage, won't you? I want to go home.'

'Of course we can be quite quiet there for a little while at all events. People will be a few weeks getting over their surprise, won't they, dearest? How tired you look.'

Lucy went up-stairs. Harriet was in

her room, a fire was blazing cheerfully, but suddenly she paused on the threshold. A slight shiver ran over her, and she turned towards Harriet.

'I shall not dress to-night. Tell Ellen to prepare the large, spare room and the dressing-room, and let Mrs. Gwillian know that we are here.'

'Mrs. Gwillian told Mr. Lumb, my lady, that she hoped you would excuse her, for she was very tired and had gone to bed in the sitting-room.'

'Certainly. I have much to do sorting some old letters down-stairs. Let no one come in this evening. To-morrow we are going home. I should not have returned but I thought——' Lucy broke off, and did not finish her sentence.

Dinner was not a cheerful meal, though Lord Stretton talked a great deal. Lucy

made an effort to answer him with some show of interest, but Lumb's presence annoyed her. She wished now that she had never returned. She had only done so because of what the world would say, and yet to this small world she seemed already dead, just as if she had never existed. The air of the place felt heavy and damp. Her head ached, and she could hardly keep calm enough to answer her husband's remarks rationally. Happily, Lord Stretton was making an effort to appear lively, in fact he was rather overdoing it. When Lucy left her husband to his wine and walked back into the drawing-room, she still felt as if she were in a strange dream. Was the tension on her nerves becoming too great? Would she be able to hold out till the morning? The drawing-room was full of ghosts, ghosts of past thoughts

all rising up to torment her. She had reckoned too much on her strength of character, and on her strength of will, now she would give worlds to be safe at Stacey Hall, at last its rightful mistress, at last. Douglas had sent word that the carriage and pair were to come the next morning to fetch them away. She must get through the intervening time without breaking down. At Stacey it would be different, there she could——No, Stacey was too near, she must go abroad a little while, she must have a proper honeymoon, all this hurry had been preposterous, but of course it had been necessary. She rose and went towards the door. The room felt close, she seemed to be conscious of Sara's presence in it; it was superstitious, unnatural, but she could not resist or fight against the feeling. She

opened the door, and then she suddenly heard her husband's voice. To whom could he be talking? To Lumb! How tiresome! She took a few steps into the hall, and listened. All at once Lord Stretton opened a door and called her.

'Lucy! Oh, there you are. Will you mind, love, coming in one moment to confront and confound this wretched man.'

'What is it?' she said, feeling as if she could not move a step forward.

'Why, I sent for him to insist on his putting a stop to that infamous gossip, and he—he sticks to it. I shall put it into the hands of my lawyer if any more of this goes on.'

Lucy followed him. She forced herself to walk calmly.

'Now, Lumb, you deserve no mercy.

Repeat what you told me, and Lady Stretton will deny it.'

Lumb stood immovable. He looked quite calm.

'I have told your lordship everything.'

Lord Stretton was trembling from anger.

'It is an infamous lie. Lady Stretton will refute it at once.'

'She cannot, my lord. I saw her with my own eyes pour in two packets to Miss Sara's sherry. I counted the packets after she had given them and before, but the last night—I changed the poison for something else, and I also verified them that night. They were the last that she administered, and the doctor said that one more dose would have been fatal. That dose was given but it was harmless, and they told me that that saved Miss Sara's life. I am no longer in her ladyship's

service, so I am free to speak. The doctor has given out that Miss Sara poisoned herself. It is no such thing. I can testify to that, but I am told that I have not sufficient to prove it; still for all that I know Miss Beddoes is innocent—Lady Stretton knows it too.'

'It is a—a lie, a—a conspiracy,' said Lady Stretton, slowly, her hands clenched nervously together.

Then she turned her head towards her husband, and she saw that he had become deadly pale, she saw that his faith was wavering.

'No, my lady, it is the truth. I was in London when you entered three chemists' shops. I followed you and saw you. You came back and refilled the empty box with powders.'

'It is a—a——' began Lady Stretton; then overwrought nature asserted itself,

and she fell fainting to the ground.

That night Lady Stretton was ill and very feverish. The doctor was sent for, her husband would not leave her. He alone could soothe her wandering fancies, he alone should hear her low, excited murmurings.

When dawn broke, however, she became calm and less feverish, and when the sun rose she opened her eyes and called, 'Douglas.'

He came to her. He too looked very worn and spent.

'Douglas—take me away—I can go, I am better, take me away.'

'Yes, Lucy—you shall go; but listen—tell me—tell me. It isn't true? You have been very excited all night, but of course your nerves were unstrung.'

She fancied by Douglas's face that he knew all, she fancied that in her fever

dreams she had betrayed herself; for she had been through terrible fever-engendered scenes, and now she felt weak and powerless. She wanted to rest and to throw herself on his love; she knew that it was great, and she believed that——

'Douglas—put your arm round me. I am sure I can go home. I shall be strong enough to go. If I had a moment of madness it was because I loved you so much, I wanted you so much, and you—you had been so long, so long in coming to me. You said that we should have to wait, and I could not wait any longer. Douglas—there is no proof—none—none.'

'But you did it?' His voice was very low, very soft.

'I wanted you. I was mad. I didn't know what I was doing. I—I—Douglas, Douglas, I am your wife.'

'Yes,' he said, slowly, 'yes—Lucy—

as soon as you can travel we will go abroad. We—we—oh, God, help us! And I—loved you—I have cut myself off from my children for you. I—I——'

Strong man that he was he broke down, and kneeling beside the bed he covered his face with his hands and sobbed. Lucy turned her face to the wall. Her sin had found her out.

But the county never knew the rights of the story. They knew that Lord Stretton had privately and very hastily married the charming widow, Mrs. Beddoes, and that—so they said—in consequence of his children's indignation he had taken his wife abroad, and meant never to return to Stacey Hall. The place was shut up, and gossip talked endlessly about it, till suddenly people heard of the marriage of Percival Osborne with Miss Beddoes,

the heiress of much wealth. The young people took a large country house near Chapel Stacey, and made there a home for Miss Osborne and—when he was in England—for Cobbin, the devoted guardian. Very soon Percival became a power in the county. He went into Parliament, and was a busy man, for he and his wife and sister spent their money in the service of humanity. Clara, to everyone's surprise, married a London clergyman, a certain Mr. Colbourne, and became a happy and a useful wife; and Virginia made quite a grand match, but her brother never married. People who brought back travellers' tales spoke of Lord and Lady Stretton as having plenty of money, for directly Mrs. Osborne came of age she had insisted on sharing her fortune with her mother; but, as people added, 'Money doesn't bring happiness, for Lord Stretton is on very bad terms

with his wife. It must be his fault, for he could not get on with his first wife, and this second Lady Stretton is a lovely woman, only, perhaps, too fond of society and admiration.' Indeed, gossip whispered many things, amongst others that Gaythorne Greenwood was always dangling round Lady Stretton, and people did say—but one thing was certain, and that was that both husband and wife looked anything but happy in spite of their wealth. When a man will live abroad and shirk his home duties, said the trite morality of gossip, it is to be expected that he will not be happy. As usual gossip sees but the half of a life story, and cannot understand even the half that it does see. Sara herself never knew the real truth about that period of misery when she lived with her mother at Chapel Stacey. At times she longed intensely—especially

when she had become a happy mother—to see her own mother, and to claim from her some tenderness and affection; but Lady Stretton never answered the two letters she wrote to her, and so they never met again. This was the only shadow in Sara's life of happiness and usefulness. One result of it was that out of the abundance of her own blessings she had always much to spare for motherless children, and for those young people who, from some cause or other, craved in vain for a mother's love. It was a joke among members of her own folk that she was the mother of many families, and that she spoilt the children of other people much more than she did her own. To this accusation she would answer, with the bright smile which she never lost,

'It is Percival's fault, he spoils his sons and his daughter in a most shocking man-

ner, but especially his daughter; and Guardian follows suit, so that Lumb and I have to do all the scolding.'

But Percival's answer invariably was,

'Whatever you may do, dear, I know that Lumb will be the ruin of the children, for he refuses them nothing.'

THE END.

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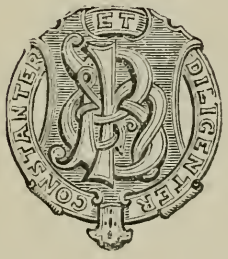

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